



The two-day  
“**RFK in EKY**” holds a mirror up  
to the promise of the  
**War on Poverty**

# WHEN KENNEDY CAME

by Linda Frye Burnham

## WHILE THE TET OFFENSIVE RAGED IN VIETNAM

in February 1968, Robert F. Kennedy was on the mountain roads of southeastern Kentucky, shaking hands and setting fire to hearts from Vortex to Prestonsburg. Conducted as part of a Senate Subcommittee on Manpower, Employment and Poverty examination of War on Poverty practices, RFK's Appalachian tour occurred one week before he announced his candidacy for President. A few months later he would be dead. But his visit touched off what the mountain people still call "a ripple of hope" that empowered them to take their future into their own hands.

This fall the people of southeastern Kentucky will look back over the past 36 years and "hold up a mirror" to history with the Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project, a real-time, multi-site recreation of RFK's 1968 tour of the region. Designed and directed by performance artist John Malpede and performed by an all-local cast at the tour's original sites, the 48-hour "RFK in EKY" Project will reproduce Kennedy's chats with children in the Barwick one-room schoolhouse, his visit with Mayor Willie Dawahare in the African-American Liberty Street neighborhood of Hazard, his surprise stop at the Yellow Creek strip-mining site, his address to students at Alice Lloyd College in Pippa Passes and his speech on the Letcher County Courthouse steps in Whitesburg.

Most significantly, the project will re-create word-for-word the three-and-a-half-hour hearing of the Senate Subcommittee on Manpower, Employment and Poverty at the gym in Fleming-Neon, where 20 Kentuckians gave testimony about making ends meet in the face of poor educational facilities, the removal of economic resources by outside investors and the exploitation of the natural environment. Local teen John Childers will play activist student newspaper writer Tommy Duff, who was suspended from high school for testifying about substandard school conditions. Others will portray his fellow students, who, some with paper bags over their heads, protested the proposed flooding of Kingdom Come Creek, which would have led to the displacement of the community.

Some of those activist students, now activist adults with prominent positions in the community, took part in an April 2004 press conference on the Letcher County Courthouse steps (with John Childers playing RFK). Dozens of high-school teens arrived on a school bus to play the audience and cheer "Kennedy" for his speech. The community leaders directly addressed the teenagers, saying they were their age in 1968, inspired by Bobby Kennedy to testify in the Senate hearing about political conditions affecting their lives in the mountains. They urged the high-schoolers to become involved this year in the same way.

The folks of southeastern Kentucky remember RFK with extraordinary fondness. His touching intimacy and directness had a lasting effect on them, says attorney Jim Pruitt, a local Democratic Party

activist who was only six when RFK came through. Pruitt now works in an office in Pikeville with pictures of "Kennedys looking at me from every direction." He says he is inspired every day by a Bobby Kennedy quote from a speech in South Africa in 1966:

Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

Anna Laura Craft, superintendent of Letcher County Schools, drove the car when Kennedy arrived in Whitesburg. "His hair," she remembers, "was the color of a copper penny." As they drove, he asked her personal questions about her plans for her life. "RFK" project coordinator Nell Fields was a little girl when her father took her to the hearing in Neon, which she believes changed her life forever. "It taught the value of hope in the face of despair," she says, or, better yet, it taught empowerment. "Something happened inside of people."

"RFK in EKY" is sponsored by Appalshop, the legendary arts and education center in Whitesburg that began in 1969 under the federal War on Poverty's Office of Economic Opportunity. Appalshop was designed to train disadvantaged Appalachian young people for jobs in the urban film and television industries. Rather than leave their rural homeland, the trainees incorporated as a nonprofit dedicated to creating opportunities for regional self-expression. Appalshop is now producing original films, video, theatre, music and spoken-word recordings, radio, photography, multimedia, books and Internet projects in the heart of Appalachia. In the process, the organization is teaching mountain people how to document, analyze and report on their history and environment in their own words.

### APPALSHOP'S AMERICAN FESTIVAL PROJECT BROUGHT

artist John Malpede from California to southeastern Kentucky to work with communities there in 2000. He heard about the 1968 RFK visit and was intrigued by its resonance with current conditions. So many of those concerns about economics, environment and education are still around today, says Malpede. The deep coal mines, disappearing in the '60s, are now gone, and corporate strip-mining and "mountain-top removal" are an everyday reality. The area still needs jobs, not welfare. Environmental degradation continues apace, with the most recent disaster, the Martin County mine-slurry spill, releasing more than 300 million gallons of sludge, nearly 30 times more liquid than the Exxon *Valdez*. And, just as in 1968, the resources of Appalachia are again being drained away to support an unpopular foreign war.

Malpede calls the project a simultaneous "reconstruction and deconstruction" of the RFK visit. He has spent many months sifting through news stories, research reports, memorabilia and

# TO KENTUCKY

