

Appalshop remembers RFK's visit to E. Ky.

PROJECT WILL RE-CREATE 1968 TOUR

HERALD-LEADER STAFF

Thirty-six years ago yesterday, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy's plane landed in Lexington, and he began a two-day tour of south-east Kentucky as part of a Senate subcommittee examination of the war on poverty. Kennedy would announce his presidential candidacy a week later.

The anniversary didn't pass unnoticed in Whitesburg. Members of Appalshop marked the occasion by announcing The Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project, a real-time re-creation of Kennedy's tour, which will launch Sept. 9 and 10.

The project will use a local cast, and will re-create all aspects of Kennedy's visit, including roadside stops, walking tours of neighborhoods and mining sites, school visits, speeches, and official hearings held at Vortex and Fleming-Neon for the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty.

Project organizers — artists, educators, journalists, government officials and citizens — will use the historical events as a mirror for the present day, linking the issues raised in 1968 to today's concerns through a series of community forums and public events.

"It was official Senate business, but it also was this star-quality sort of deal," said artist and organizer John Malpede, who is also overseeing a film documentary of the project. "He was also remembered very fondly here, because he was one of the first big public leaders to come over here."

Kennedy's tour was constructed to give the citizens a voice in the community, Malpede said, "And Kennedy listened. When you look at what happened, they sort of jumped on that and were very active in creating the conversation."

Organizers noted that, as in the election year of 1968, Eastern Kentuckians today continue to look for sustainable economic development, educational and vocational advancement, and ways to stem the out-migration of the region's young people.

"We want to re-stimulate civic engagement and do it in a way that's really fun," Malpede said, "and put that moment up to the current moment and see what we can learn. ..."

Yesterday's press conference had a flavor of things to come in September: Kennedy and his entourage (portrayed by Letcher County high school students) were greeted at the courthouse by crowds and a marching band.

So, if the original event was in February, why wait until September to do the big re-creation?

It boils down to snow days, Malpede said.

"I'm amazed he (Kennedy) was able to do it in February — especially as the roads were not as together as they are now," he said.

Appalshop is still seeking community participation for the Kennedy Project. For information, e-mail rfkineky@appalshop.org or call Appalshop at (606) 633-0108.