Robert F. Kennedy visited Kentucky in a war on poverty; 36 years later, the region still fights the battles.

Jeff Thomas, 52, taped a recording of Robert F. Kennedy's visit to Eastern Kentucky in 1968. Thomas was there when Kennedy visited the school in Barwick, and yesterday a re-creation of Kennedy's visit passed through again.

REVISITING POVERTY
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Performance prompts new look at old problems

By Greg Kocher
HERALD-LEADER STAFF WRITER

VORTEX — An unusual piece of political theater returned to its original stage yesterday as a troupe of performers re-enacted Sen. Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 visit to Eastern Kentucky.

"RFK in EKY," billed as a "multi-site re-creation" of Kennedy's two-day, 200-mile tour, is designed to foster public discussion about the region's past, progress and future.

"It reminds all of us what was going on then and makes us look at what is going on now," said Peter Edelman, a former Kennedy aide who accompanied the junior senator from New York to Kentucky 36 years ago. Edelman watched yesterday's performances in Wolfe, Breathitt, Knott and Perry.

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ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

Kennedy talked with students at a school in Breathitt County, on a tour of Eastern Kentucky in order to examine the "War on Poverty" act.

IF YOU GO
All events are free.

Today, 9 a.m.: Pancake breakfast at Appalshop media and cultural center in Whitesburg.

10 a.m.: Kennedy, portrayed by Jack Faust, will give a speech at the Letcher County Courthouse in Whitesburg.

11 a.m.: Re-enactment of Senate subcommittee hearing at the Fleming-Neon High School gym in Neon.

4:30 p.m.: Discussion about the "War on Poverty" and issues raised by the re-enactment, Floyd County courthouse in Prestonsburg.

Saturday: Neon Days Festival in Letcher County will have RFK memorabilia on display. Discussions of the "War on Poverty" and the RFK re-enactment at 1 and 3:30 p.m.
Jack Faust, center, playing Sen. Robert F. Kennedy of New York, talked to Frank Taylor as Rep. Carl D. Perkins, of Hindman. At left was Mitty Owens as Kennedy aide Peter Edelman. The real Edelman was a spectator yesterday at the re-enactment of Kennedy's visit to Kentucky.
In 1968, senator found problems all too familiar today

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counties.
Performers and observers agreed that what eastern Kentucky needs now is the same as when Kennedy visited: more jobs.

Some jobs can be found in eastern Kentucky cities, but full-time employment remains scarce in more rural, isolated spots, said Mary Cox, 51, who was one of five students in the Vortex school when Kennedy came to that Wolfe County community.

“The younger generations, they’ve all moved to town or somewhere else where they are working,” Cox said.

Kennedy came to the state in February 1968 to examine the Lyndon Johnson administration’s “War on Poverty” legislation enacted in 1964. “RFK in EKY” re-enacted speeches, school visits, walking tours of neighborhoods and a strip mine, and official hearings held at Vortex and Fleming-Neon for the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty.

For example, during the Vortex hearing yesterday, Berna Matthews portrayed Viola Holland, the real-life housewife who testified how she fed her family with homegrown vegetables, meat and milk.

When Kennedy, portrayed by Hazard attorney Jack Faust, said “That does sound good,” Matthews responded as Holland had: “Come around sometime and we’ll show you how it tastes.”

From Vortex, the caravan of cars went to the Breathitt County cove of Barwick, where the group assembled in the same one-room school in which Kennedy met and spoke with schoolchildren. One of those students, Jimmy Darrell “J.D.” Farler, now 45, recalled how Kennedy softly told him: “You can be what you want to be.”

John Malpede, who conceived and directed the re-creation, produced the project with Appalshop, a Whitesburg arts and media organization created with War on Poverty funding in 1969.

Rather than tell the story in a theater and invite people in to see the performance, “RFK in EKY” brought theater to the streets, where the people are, and invited them not only to watch but to participate. Observers were invited to don 60s-era clothes and hairstyles.

Malpede hopes that Kentuckians and people everywhere won’t sit on the sidelines of their communities, but will actively work in the political process to make their communities better.

Malpede said that there was no political intent in staging the re-enactment shortly before a presidential election other than to rekindle dialogue “about what is the responsibility of the government to the citizen and what is the responsibility of the citizen to government.”

Assembling, funding and staging the $300,000 production—paid through funds raised from private foundations—took four years. The cast of 50 are amateurs, and some have never acted before. Their costumes come from churches, rummage sales and closets.

Local owners of 60s vintage automobiles loaned their cars to add to the nostalgic effect.

With his gray hair and heavier physique, Faust, 55, had initial doubts about trying to play the younger Robert Kennedy.

“I can play a really good Ted Kennedy,” Faust said.

But this was more a staging of ideas and less an exact recreation. By hearing testimony and dialogue from the public record of the hearings, Faust hopes audiences will draw parallels to today. Faust notes that, as in 1968, people now are concerned about employment, pollution and the migration of young people away from the region.

“What I would like to see is for people to just think that we don’t have to accept the way things are right now,” Faust said.

The War on Poverty had some success. Appalachia’s poverty rate has dropped from 31 percent in 1960 to 13.6 percent in 2000, just over a point higher than the national average. And the percentage of adults in the region with a high school education or better has increased by more than 70 percent.

And yet, as the Associated Press reported earlier this year, after almost $10 billion in federal spending in four decades, only eight of the 410 counties in Appalachia are equal to or better than the national average on indicators such as per capita income. Wolfe County in 1999 had the seventh highest child-poverty rate in the nation.

Nevertheless, Monell Patton, a 64-year-old Vortex resident, remembers Kennedy fondly. Yesterday she sat on the porch of the same house from which she watched the 1968 visit.

“To think about him caring enough to come to this little place, you know, when he could have went to so many big places, it brings back a lot of memories,” Patton said. “It makes you want to cry.”

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