New prevention program empowers Appalachians across the state

By CLAIRE JOHNSON
OPINIONS & CULTURES EDITOR

Over the course of Appalachia's history, interventionist programs have entered the region with a variety of strategies. From charity to development, programs have fought against poverty, drug addiction, extraction, negative stereotypes and more.

Since the beginning, these intervention programs have relied on strategies from successful programs outside the region, which neglected the unique culture and identity of struggling Appalachians, Tammy Collins, associate director of the Center of Excellence for Recovery, said.

In contrast, Appalachia's newest program, Appalachian Up (App Up), relies on the strengths already found in Appalachian communities: craftsmanship, storytelling, resilience—characteristics and traditions that have long enriched the region.

"App Up is an innovative prevention education program developed by Marshall University, prevention professionals and researchers," Collins said. "And we created it specifically for Appalachian communities, rather than taking a program that was developed somewhere else and trying to adapt and adapt it to our region."

Collins first got the idea for the program after speaking with other groups who had tailored their strategy to the culture of their location.

"I was in a conference and saw the other folks were using different cultures as prevention for their young people. And I thought, 'Oh my gosh, we have such wonderful aspects of Appalachia. So many strengths, we're so resilient, we're creative, we have this love of place and community,'" said Collins.

After the initial idea, Collins dove into research and planning. Her and her team developed a list of Appalachian characteristics and activities that bring a sense of empowerment and comfort to community members. She wanted the curriculum to promote positivity and mental health within Appalachia, as opposed to the negative views and stereotypes.

"We did our nerdy stuff, and did the literature review to see what our components would be effective," said Collins. "We also interviewed 26 folks that were prominent within kind of Appalachian culture. And we did a series of interviews on them and we wrote up a qualitative research study to distill down the findings of what they felt like Appalachian's strengths were."

From their research, Collins and her team settled on five prevention education sessions to improve self-esteem and self-advocacy among Appalachian community members, and a variety of arts mentoring sessions celebrating Appalachian culture: canning, quilting, cooking and other traditional Appalachian activities.

Austin Persinger, director of Appalachian Mental Health Training, said the curriculum combines several different presentation techniques.

"There's a lot of open discussion and then some activities in the sessions, just so people aren't just listening to somebody talk. They're really very discussion based," said Persinger. "And those are all scripted, and those will have a great similarity between any sites that that do them, because the questions are scripted, the prompts are scripted, and some of the information that the facilitator shares."

These sessions were then implemented in six pilot tests for the age group 16-25 in sites across Appalachia. The test groups showed improvements in self-esteem and self-advocacy after exposure to the curriculum. Collins was excited by these results and hoped to expand them over larger test groups.

"What we discovered when we did the pilot test…is that it was really good for kids that was younger, could be adapted for kids that's younger," said Collins. "It was also good for folks that were a little older, and then we had so many of our young people that went back when they did the sessions, they would go back home and tell their parents, their grandparents, their little siblings, and they'd be like, 'listen to what I learned today. This is so cool.'"

The program is currently expanding by locating and training facilitators that can reach members of the Appalachian community with the AppUp message.

"We're essentially trying to get just any groups that work with the public in any kind of educational way that want to add some interesting programming to their mix," said Persinger. "Public libraries, after school programs for age, extension services, every support organization, senior centers, community centers--the wide range."

App Up will be offering an all-day, in-person facilitator training session on Dec. 2 at Marshall. Registration for the event is $423 per person and participation guarantees curriculum materials. For more information on Appalachian Up, visit mucenterofexcellence.org.

"There is 423 counties in Appalachia. My ultimate hope is that we get somebody teaching [Appalachian Up] in every one of those counties," said Persinger.

While Appalachia continues to battle hardship, its people persist. Persinger, Collins and their team's endeavors have answered the regional negativity with community-based positivity.

Claire Johnson can be contacted at johnson1983@marshall.edu.



One of the first cohorts of the pilot program for App Up. (Courtesy of Carri Strunk)

P

The Parthenon, Marshall University's student newspaper, is
published by students every Thursday.
The editorial staff is responsible for news and editorial content.

Trista Honaker - Executive Editor
Davina Snyder - Managing Editor
Soleil Woolard - News Editor
Alana Romero Lozano - Sports Editor
Claire Johnson - Opinions & Cultures Editor
Hannah Anderson - Copy Editor
Tally Mamula - Digital Media Manager
Sandy York - Faculty Advisers
Follow The Parthenon on X and Instagram @ MUParthenon

109 Communications Bldg
Marshall University | One John Marshall Drive
Huntington, West Virginia 25755 | parthenon@marshall.edu
Letters to the Editor are accepted. See guidelines online.

The Parthenon's Corrections Policy
Factual errors appearing in The Parthenon should be reported to the editor immediately following publication.
Corrections the editor deems necessary will be printed as
soon as possible following the error.

