

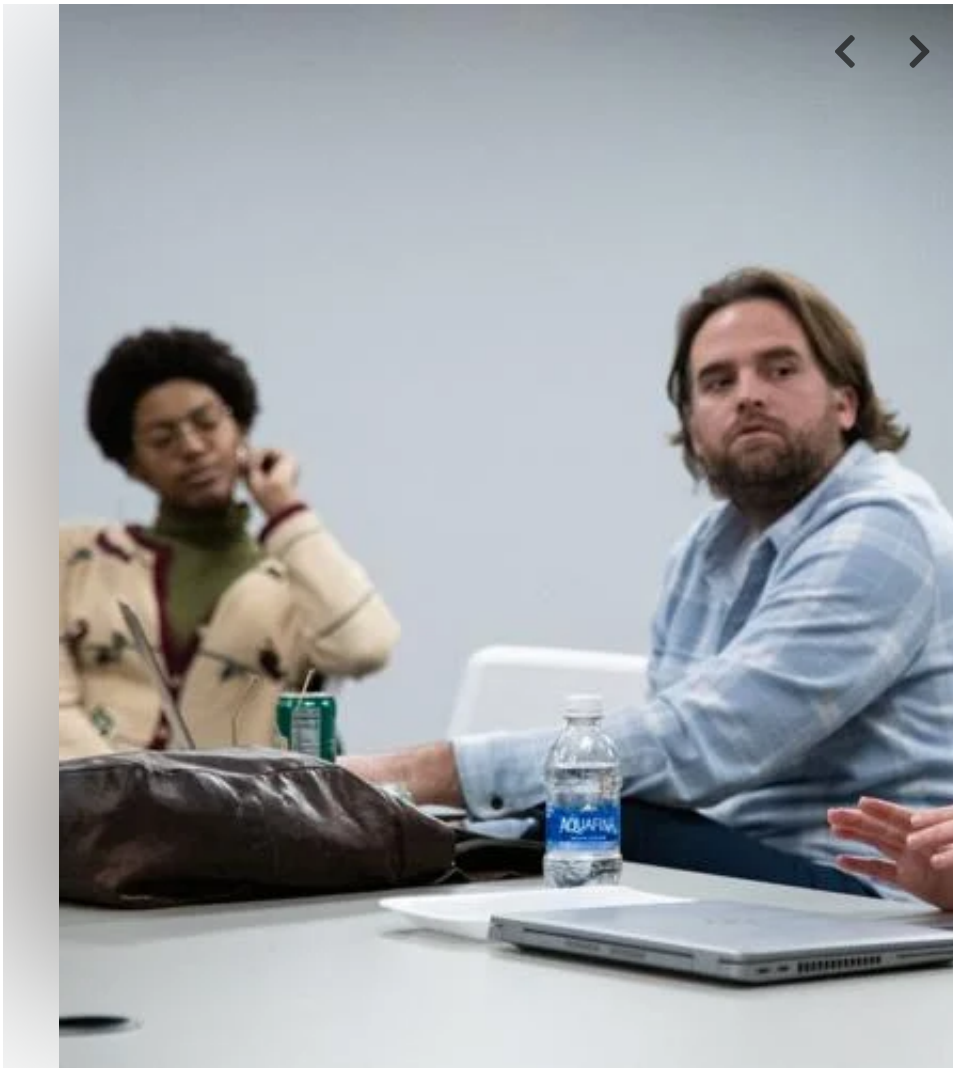
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'Civic Imagination' incubator returns with six new storytellers

By MICHAEL J. COLLINS michael.collins@bgdailynews.com

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Elon Justice (right) of KET presents her Appalachian Retelling Project id members of the second cohort of Accelerate KY's "Civic Imagination Tea 8, 2024. The incubator cohort, which is comprised of six multidisciplinary personal projects that focus primarily on stories of Kentucky culture, pr participants to professionals across the region to make their projects a re gamey

From tales of Appalachian life to tabletop games to blues music compendiums, the Accelerate KY “Civic Imagination Team” incubator is pioneering new ways of storytelling.

Each incubator cohort is comprised of six multidisciplinary members who met regularly for guidance and feedback on a personal project of some kind. The group’s second cohort met Friday to begin workshopping their projects for the next year.

Sam Ford, executive director of Accelerate KY and co-creator of the incubator, said the incubator connects participants to professionals across the region to make their projects a reality.



“Civic imagination is sort of how you draw from pop culture and everything that’s out there to imagine and think about real-world problems differently, and how you might fuse that into a story you tell,” Ford said.

The incubator focuses primarily on stories of Kentucky culture and provides each participant a \$2,000 honorarium and regular workshop sessions. Ford added that they also rely on collaboration with previous mentors, hoping to snowball their capabilities as the years go on.

This cohort includes Elon Justice, Lamont Pearley, Esma Soliman, Payton May, Shawn Quinn and Nessa Unseld.

Justice, a documentarian and producer for Kentucky Educational Television, plans to expand her Appalachian Retelling Project with help from the incubator.

Her work, hosted at TheAppalachianRetellingProject.com, includes collecting and sharing stories from Appalachian life in part to combat misconceptions of the region.

“A lot of people in Appalachia have trouble envisioning a future for themselves that’s positive,” Justice said. “I really hope to be able to use this time to think about how we can see the stories that people in the region are telling themselves and how we can start to imagine what the future could look like.”

Justice also hopes to host more in-person workshops for Appalachian residents to help them better tell their stories.

“It’s just giving people the opportunity to tell their own story on their own terms, and that’s really the main thing that I’m hoping to do,” Justice said.

Pearley, a folklorist, New York Blues Hall of Fame inductee and host of NPR's The African American Folklorist podcast, aims to create a "digital repository" of all things blues using augmented or virtual reality.

"From interviews to festivals to performances, documentation of the blues looking to not only give context, but give a realistic, less nostalgic look at the tradition, but one that can be experienced, interactive, not just one dimensional," Pearley said.

He added the project will incorporate elements of life, from food to fun to family, that are often inseparable from the art. Through everything he does, including the project, he hopes to "put the African American people in their proper context."

He said one idea is to put participants on a digital train with a radio station, allowing them to travel through significant blues hubs and experience its development in an interactive setting.

Soliman, a Fulbright Scholar from Egypt pursuing a master's degree in English language and literature at Western Kentucky University, is hosting and producing a podcast called "International Voices." Soliman invites people studying abroad to share their experiences.

"It's a platform for intercultural communication," Soliman said. "We communicate among cultures, and we see how studying abroad is a way to make people culturally competent and how people change after the study abroad."

She has already published an episode, which can be found on Spotify.

Payton May, a software developer and chief operations officer of tech firm Bit Source, is looking to explore the relationship between residents of eastern Kentucky and Pikeville and the food they eat. He hopes to create an installation utilizing technical elements and physical displays.

“Culturally, our relationship with foods has obviously changed and our working style has changed, as well as communal behaviors,” May said.

He wants to explore the history of the area from subsistence farming to modern-day fast food reliance, highlighting the cultural and environmental factors that have pushed that change.

Quinn, an eighth-grade history teacher at Bowling Green Junior High, is crafting a tabletop roleplaying game utilizing mythological stories in a modern setting. He said he has taken inspiration from games like Dungeons & Dragons, but hopes to create a more accessible environment.

Quinn said his skills lie more on the creative side, but he hopes the incubator can connect him with more technically skilled professionals who can potentially help with app design.

“I would like to find somebody who could help me with an app where when you are playing, whoever is in charge can send messages to each person individually, sort of like passing a note,” Quinn said. “In D&D, a lot of it’s based around combat. This is more based around investigation, talking with your story, putting two and two together to find the right solution.”

Unsold, a senior at WKU, is hoping to expand her nonprofit company Coleus Academy, an online learning platform focused on life skills and civic understanding. Her work, which she dubbed “Wikipedia for life skills,” can be viewed at coleusacademy.org.

“It’s very much meant to be a quickly accessible and digestible knowledge repository,” Unseld said. “It’s something you can fall back on when you’re feeling a bit unsure about what something is or your next steps before diving headfirst into something.”

She said the incubator is a chance to learn ways to better structure the website’s content and explore ways to include storytelling in the process.

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