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WKU's 2024 Mountain Workshops focuses on life in Whitley County

Posted On 30 Oct 2024 By : Trevor Sherman Comment: 0 Tag: Jack Gruber, James Kenney, Mountain Workshops, Tom Broekema, Western Kentucky University, Williamsburg Tourism and Convention Center

Jim Sharp. Justeen Wilson. Laurel West. Mike Culver. Amanda Croley. Herman Canada. Chandler Powell. Roddy Harrison. Kayla Henderson. Alice Fae Weiland. Andrew Modica. Jonathon Wyatt. Dal Macon. Alicia Vanover. Bill Conn. These are just some of the names of individuals living in Whitley County who were featured in this year's Mountain Workshops, presented by Western Kentucky University.

The completed project, which went live online over the weekend, features a grand total of 70 entries that document many of the people, places and events in the local community through photo and video journalism.

"Education is our primary goal and inspiration," said Tim Broekema, a professor at the WKU School of Media and Communications who oversees production of the Mountain Workshops each year. "The result of that education and inspiration is an archive of communities across the Commonwealth."

The mission statement for the Mountain Workshops, now in its 49th year, reads as follows: "The Mountain Workshops gather storytellers from around the world to document the diverse communities within the Commonwealth of Kentucky through visual and written narratives. We seek to educate and inspire those participating in the workshops as well as those in the communities we document. We believe in the power of human connection through storytelling, and we create and preserve a valuable cultural archive of Kentucky life."

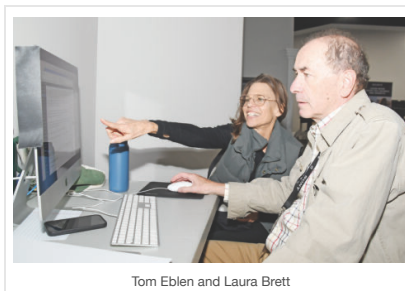
Indeed, participants in the annual Mountain Workshops program do come from far and wide to lend their expertise as WKU students go about documenting daily life in the communities that they visit. As Broekema put it, while the university may be the ones spearheading the efforts, they are able to call upon professionals who are working all around the globe thanks to a "plethora of networks" that has been built up over these many years.

"This is an opportunity to learn and grow, and, as a result, end up with a body of work," Broekema explained, adding that the Mountain Workshops functions as an "around the clock operation" while it is in town.

Broekema himself arrived in Williamsburg on Thursday, Oct. 18, with additional personnel coming in during the following weekend. The Williamsburg Tourism and Convention Center was donated to the Mountain Workshops crew to use as a base of operations throughout last week. The facility was transformed into a command center of sorts, featuring workstations, conference areas and a presentation hall.

Going to-and-from the tourism center each day, a small army of student photographers and videographers spent last Tuesday-through-Saturday meeting with people throughout Whitley County. The results of the interviews that were conducted during those meetings can now be viewed, watched and read online at www.mountainworkshops.org.

"Our goal is to eventually visit all 120 counties," Broekema said. "In exchange, you get an amazing website about your community that is accessible by anyone for one year. There is also a print book that will be released about a year later. We just ask for a donation of space to work in, and maybe to work out some deals on hotel rooms."



Tom Eblen and Laura Brett

Broekema admitted that visiting every county in Kentucky may simply not be possible for a number of different reasons, both logistical and practical, but he and Mountain Workshops Director James Kenney both agree that it is the ultimate goal of the project.

“There is a lot of heart that goes into this, but that’s because there is a lot of heart in these communities,” Kenney said. “It’s just a matter of us finding the stories and making contact with these folks.”

“Williamsburg has opened its arms to us, and we are doing some great stories,” Kenney continued. “We find that is very common in each of the communities that we go into once they know what we’re trying to do, and what our overarching mission is. What we leave for the community is a historical record. A document of their community, at least for five days in October. It is amazing how much can be accomplished in that short amount of time.”

Elaborating on the “overarching mission” of the Mountain Workshops, Kenney said, “The local leadership has to understand what we’re doing. Once we get a ‘yes’ from them, we can go out into the community and find stories that, I think, have universal themes and connect to more than just this one community.”

“One thing that doesn’t change are the stories about the people,” Kenney said while addressing the fact that next year will mark the 50th anniversary of the Mountain Workshops. “The individuals may change, but storytelling in its purest form is really just telling the stories with those universal themes. The technology is different now, and the way that we go about doing things may have changed, but we are still trying to do the same thing in telling those stories that have that universal appeal.”

The pursuit of these stories, Kenney explained, offers WKU students opportunities to gain valuable real world experience. “Not everyone says ‘yes,’ and there may be other issues that prevent you from doing what you thought you were going to do,” he said. “You have to pivot. That is a critical skill to have as a journalist, so this is a great learning opportunity. The final product is just the icing on the cake. It’s more about what you did to get there, and what you learned while getting there.”

In order to really help drive home the importance of learning from those real world experiences, the Mountain Workshops utilize a diverse team of coaches that can help guide young journalists as they go about compiling their video footage and photo essays.

Among this year’s coaches was Jack Gruber, a longtime photojournalist with the USA Today. Gruber has contributed to the Mountain Workshops as a coach for the past five years. An Ohio native, he came to WKU in the mid-2000’s to study videography. He now resides in Washington D.C.

“I cover political events, sports and news all across the country,” Gruber said of his duties with USA Today. “My job here is to teach photojournalism. How to tell a story. How to go out there and not just find somebody to take a picture of, but to tell their story in a way that shows they are a part of this community.”

Speaking about the importance of the Mountain Workshops, Gruber said, “This is the 49th year of this [project]. The sheer number of photographs that have been collected is astronomical, but it is also wonderful to have that collection that you could never replicate. Even though you are coming here to learn how to do something, you’re also coming to be a part of this amazing project that so many people have already been a part of. To be a part of that legacy.”

Kenney summed up the sentiment behind the Mountain Workshops by saying, “A big part of covering a community is becoming part of it, even if it’s just for five days.”

To see the 2024 Mountain Workshops featuring the people, places and events of Whitley County, type the previously mentioned web address into your web browser.

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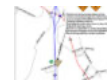
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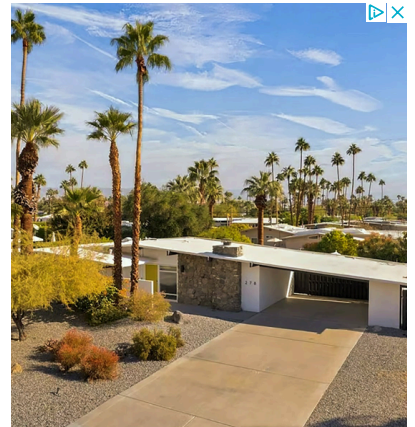
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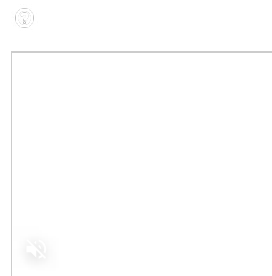


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