Too often young people in rural communities grow up hearing that “success” means to leave because it is impossible to make a way “here.” This phenomenon is not reserved just for rural places; the same could be said of many neighborhoods, barrios, and reservations across the country. I believe that as folklorists working in community, one of the most important ways that we can put our skill set to use is to challenge this assertion by actively engaging youth in an appreciation of the cultural context and heritage of where they live. Offering an inclusive understanding of “value” and facilitating mentor relationships help them to realize that it is indeed possible, even rewarding, to live in and contribute to their home communities. The Co-Op Youth Council (CYC) encourages young people in large, sparsely populated Oregon County, Missouri, to think about how to define “success,” assert their value to different aspects of community life, and challenge them to “be the change that they wish to see in the world,” as Gandhi said, starting at home.

The CYC is an outgrowth project of the Oregon County Food Producers and Artisans Co-Op (OCFPAC), a collective of farmers, ranchers, artisans, and concerned citizens working toward a holistic approach to community renewal and sufficiency. The larger organization offers a market and community center on the square of our county seat in Alton, Missouri. In this small town in the southern Missouri Ozarks butted up against the Arkansas line, goods can be sold or traded and local knowledge is cherished and shared. At its heart, the Co-op is a below-the-ground-up approach to community development, incorporating resources from various fields, folklore to restoration biology, to address the cultural, economic, ecological, spiritual, and physical wellbeing of place. The belief that a vibrant, dynamic cultural practice is both the flower and the seed of a well-tended community guides this approach.

The Co-Op’s main goal is to nurture an environment in which cultural traditions flourish. We believe that it is our responsibility, as members of our small communities, to lend our gifts to this end. My toolbox includes folklore and community-organizing skills. I began organizing producers and artisans in the county five years ago. We opened our storefront and community center two years ago. I see my role as a steward, facilitator, and conduit of and between community, traditions, ideas, and actions. I have adopted the term “Project Steward” to describe my role, which to me infers a connection between people and place and has a generational implication.
Youth have always played a part in our organization. We formed as a multi-member LLC operating as a nonprofit. While we give 100 percent of our Co-Op Shop profits to the community, I wanted to form a for-profit entity, which allowed us not to have a board. I felt that this would give each member an equal say in how the project developed, encouraging ownership and responsibility. OCFPAC members range in age from 12 to 90. Many younger children participate in events with their parents by volunteering in the shop and aiding with events. Everyone has an equal say in how projects develop and profits are reinvested, regardless of age.

While engaging young people has always been important, up until a few months ago, they had no separate committees. I realized that a Co-Op Youth Council could be very powerful both for young people and our communities at large. We intend to have positive impact in a wide variety of community issues that bear on young people’s lives. I wanted to carve out a space where they could identify community needs and resources as well as ideas and solutions with the thought that the larger Co-Op could then help them. This epiphany literally came to me in the middle of the night. I sat up and immediately thought of community-minded young people who would share the vision. I shot off a quick set of texts and messages to them and their parents, and they all enthusiastically agreed to participate and offered suggestions for additional council members.

A CYC goal is to nurture aspects of the cultural landscape integral to community identity and understand and identify those qualities within the group. “Building relationships is a big part of service and that is what we are doing here. It goes a long way,” said CYC member Mary Alice Òesch. Another goal is to challenge the CYC to identify projects or activities that could make that cultural landscape stronger and more inclusive. This was our first exercise as a group. We split a giant Post-it note down the middle and wrote on one side challenges and on the other opportunities for improving livability for young people in the community. The list of activities that CYC members wanted to initiate grew very quickly, while the community qualities that they felt were special and to be supported remained empty. Through discussion, it became apparent that most CYC members had not spent any time outside their home communities and did not know what made it “special.” So, that becomes part of the mission too. Folklore is a field that researches and documents such qualities. Moving forward, documentation will be integrated into the CYC’s community activities, discussions, and initiatives with the hope that, along with altering their sense of possibility within their community, youth will gain a better understanding of the cultural context of the region and integrate that context into their projects.

The CYC hit the ground running. They chose two projects from their list of community wants to tackle this summer, an Outdoor Movie Series and Art Walks. We are 45 miles from the nearest movie theater, and I don’t even know where the nearest Art Walk is, but the CYC members believe that these activities will bring a wide variety of people together in fellowship. Indeed, their efforts have been the talk of the towns. They raised the funds to host these events, including donations of a giant movie screen and commercial popcorn maker from local supporters. In line with our OCFPAC methodology, CYC members participate in all aspects of planning and execution. We worked
together to draw up proposals for potential sponsors, they attended city council meetings to ask for use of public spaces and support, and they gave radio and newspaper interviews. They are managing budgets, testing equipment, ordering supplies, programming artists, and learning to pool resources. Their enthusiasm has also translated into greater interest for the larger Co-Op. The CYC is being encouraged to have great ideas and learn what it takes to bring them to fruition. In return, we all reap the benefits of success and appreciation from our organization and the community at large. Success is already improving the group’s identity. The first Outdoor Movie Series event opened with the Ozark Highballers, a dynamic old-time stringband, and nearly 400 people attended.

The CYC plans to use these events as fundraisers that will allow them to tackle two more community projects on their list, and so on. In coming months, the CYC will begin working with OCFPAC members on a Foxfire-style publication to document purveyors of homesteading skills here (new and old) and serve as a resource guide for new residents. It will document and bridge the cultural traditions of the generational families of Oregon County with the slew of back-to-the-landers moving into the county in recent years.

There are deep educational outcomes from this work. These young people are learning many skills in a variety of academic subjects, including math, language arts, and social studies, and they are calling upon local cultural assets. What is important to me is that it is done in a way that encourages them to be proactive in crafting the present and the future of their home communities.

As the facilitator, I am also learning a great deal. When I invited current CYC members to join at its formation, I knew that they would have wonderful ideas. I did not know how good they would be at following through on those ideas. I assumed that I would carry the burden of logistics or a separate OCFPAC committee would help them. The opposite has been the case. The CYC has enthusiastically taken the bull by the horns, from delegating tasks to attending meetings religiously. The CYC is a fledgling, but a healthy one. I look forward to seeing it grow in anticipation of what these young people dream and do to strengthen our communities in the future.

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