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Hopa Mountain and the Idea of Highlander: A Mission Driven by a Philosophy

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Abstract

Hopa Mountain is a nonprofit organization committed to developing citizen leaders in rural and tribal communities in the Northern Rockies. The mission of Hopa Mountain is rooted in the principle that the local people have within themselves the strength and wisdom to bring about community change. This mission was inspired by the broader philosophy of Myles Horton that has been implemented for over 80 years at Highlander Folk School. This philosophy challenges individuals and organizations to work toward creating a world as it “ought to be” rather than on how it is presently.

Introduction

Ten years ago, Bonnie Sachatello-Sawyer, Laura Robin, and Edie Pinkham founded Hopa Mountain, a nonprofit organization based in Bozeman, Montana, to invest in citizen leaders in rural and tribal communities in the Northern Rockies. Over the past 10 years, among other initiatives, Hopa Mountain launched StoryMakers to support early learning within rural and tribal families, developed youth leadership programs, and enriched the potential for informal science education from early childhood to graduate school in Native communities. The organization has also supported citizen-led community projects and the development of rural and tribal nonprofits with a special emphasis on investing in Native-led nonprofit organizations through Strengthening the Circle, a Native nonprofit leadership program.

One of the primary inspirations for Hopa Mountain came from the work of the Highlander Folk School,

which is now named the Highlander Research and Education Center. Highlander is an adult educational program that has been focused on creating a more democratic and just society since its founding 81 years ago in the Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee. Because both of us—Bonnie Sachatello-Sawyer, the current executive director, and Kirk Branch, the Hopa Mountain Board President and an associate professor of English at Montana State University—have been deeply influenced by the philosophy and practice of Highlander, we offer this reflection on the ways that Highlander’s vision provides a philosophical foundation for Hopa Mountain as well as a sustainable framework to invest in ongoing community and social change. In particular, there are three guiding principles from Highlander that Hopa Mountain has incorporated into its programming and vision: (a) the belief that local community leaders are best poised to identify and address the opportunities and challenges faced in these

communities; (b) the idea that the goals most worth working toward are by definition unachievable; and (c) the belief that the work of the organization should not be focused on helping people live better in the world as it is but rather should focus on creating the world as it ought to be.

Hopa Mountain

From the beginning, Hopa Mountain has been committed to a principle deeply embedded in the work and practice of Highlander, a belief in the potential of people working in community to solve the problems they have identified. Candie Carawan, a long-time staff member at Highlander, described the Highlander's approach succinctly: "From its start, this has been one of the few places that takes seriously the notion that grass-roots people, dispossessed people, who do not have money or power or much formal education can solve their own problems" (Applebome, 1990). When the Highlander Folk School opened in 1932, it focused on labor education, believing that the creation of strong unions was a critical aspect of creating more democratic working conditions. The staff identified natural leaders and worked to support them by providing classes—both on site at the Highlander campus in Monteagle, Tennessee, and also on location in cities throughout the South. Participants learned the basics of creating and running a union as well as the process of negotiation and striking. When Highlander shifted its focus to civil rights in the early 1950s, it continued working with "grass-roots people." Rosa Parks attended a class at Highlander 4 months before her refusal to move to the back of the bus sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and she credited her experience at Highlander with inspiring her to action (Moyers, 1983, p. 272).

Hopa Mountain is rooted in this principle, which guides all its programs. The organization is fundamentally committed to the idea that "the possibilities for sustained improvements in economic, environmental, and social health lie in the strength, innate wisdom, and creativity of local people—in their relationships with each other and the land. They know their communities' needs and have good ideas for strength-based solutions" (Hopa Mountain, n.d., para.

1). From its inception, Hopa Mountain has developed its programs based on a principal of deep listening, hearing from community members about local problems, and working to support the solutions those members imagine.



Hopa Mountain's goal is to contribute to the health and vitality of low-income rural and tribal communities and reduce the disparities that stem from geographic isolation, lack of educational opportunities, economic inequality, public policies, and racism. Our long-term strategy to realize this goal is to invest in rural and tribal citizen leaders by supporting their initiatives that improve local education, ecological health, and economic development. By encouraging these citizen leaders' ideas using strength-based approaches to individual and community change and by linking them to additional resources that include regional and national networks, we are increasing their bases of support. By providing rural and tribal leaders with training, mentoring, networking opportunities, and financial resources, Hopa Mountain's Board and staff are contributing to rural and tribal community vitality for the long haul.

The most famous program in Highlander history, the Citizenship Schools, grew out of a simple comment made by a participant in a 1954 United Nations Workshop. There, Esau Jenkins, the owner of a bus company on Johns Island, South Carolina, noted that what the people on Johns Island really needed was a school that could teach community members to read and write so that they could pass the literacy test

required of voters and that were in place specifically to disfranchise African-Americans. At the beginning, Highlander's director, Myles Horton, was skeptical about running literacy classes, but after extensive consultation with members of the community that was guided by Septima Clark, a South Carolina teacher with a long knowledge of Johns Island, Highlander started the first Citizenship School in the back of a store in 1957. All the students who finished that first class went on to pass the literacy test and register as voters, and the program bloomed throughout the South, playing a role in the registration of tens of thousands of African-Americans and ending the power of the literacy test as a tool of disfranchisement (see Charron, 2009; Glen, 1996). The program existed as a result of deep listening, and it relied on local teachers and supporters all over the region for its successes.

Strengthening the Circle, a Hopa Mountain program designed to support the creation and sustainability of nonprofits in Native American communities, relies on this principle of deep listening. Hopa Mountain launched Strengthening the Circle in 2006 in cooperation with Native nonprofit leaders by listening to their desires to build the organizational sustainability and effectiveness of Native-led organizations. Native nonprofit leaders are involved in every aspect of the year-round mentoring and support services. Seven years later, it is a proven initiative that emphasizes peer-to-peer learning among Native nonprofit leaders. Hopa Mountain, Seventh Generation Fund, Artemisia Associates, and WolfStar Productions cooperatively organize an annual 4-day gathering with follow-up mentoring and technical support. It is an exciting time and important work as Native nonprofits are emerging as a force for strengthening community self-reliance, education, entrepreneurial approaches, and social services. After the participating Native American nonprofit leaders and organizations received training and mentoring, independent evaluations have shown that almost all of these nonprofits have stronger boards and more financial support and programs to serve Native families.

Current leadership in Native nonprofit organizations also recognizes the need for mentoring new and emerging Native leaders. As the nonprofit sector grows, there is an increasing need for more individuals to serve

as staff and board members. The nonprofit sector provides young Native professionals with a career option that lies outside of government or private business. This is particularly important because the government sector (federal and tribal) is still the largest employer on most reservations. Paid fellowships for Native college students and for early career professionals who are with nonprofit organizations of their choice expose them to nonprofit career choices and opportunities.



By supporting nonprofits created by Native American community members and by addressing their specific requests for technical assistance in local settings, Hopa Mountain staff and others, including their peers, provide resources and training to leaders who understand specific local needs and challenges and how they might best be addressed. These leaders, in turn, become teachers and mentors to others developing nonprofits in Indian Country. These nonprofits support Native youth and families, schools, health programs, and many other programs across the Northern Rockies and into the Dakotas and the Pacific Northwest. Hopa Mountain's role is to provide ongoing resources and training so that leaders within specific communities can better identify and address the local issues that they understand better than anyone else.

Throughout Highlander's history, the school has stated its objectives in terms that could never be fully realized. In speeches about the school delivered in Nashville in 1939, James Dombrowski (1994), a staff

member at the school, identified Highlander as “seeking to change the present order and to establish a more just and ethical society.” Highlander’s “Statement of Purpose, Program and Policy” in 1950 used these terms:

We reaffirm our faith in democracy as a goal that will bring dignity and freedom to all; in democracy as an expanding concept encompassing human relations from the smallest community organization to international structure; and permeating all economic, social, and political activities. (Highlander, 1950)

Such goals of (a) a just and ethical society and (b) dignity and freedom for all people can never fully be reached for the simple reason that society can always become more just and ethical and that dignity and freedom will never be fully attained by all people. As Myles Horton (1990) explained in his autobiography, *The Long Haul*, the value of such goals lies precisely in the impossibility of their realization:

The goal I’m talking about is one that can never be reached. It’s a direction, a concept of society that grows as you go along....Goals are unattainable in the sense that they always grow....In any situation there will always be something that’s worse, and there will always be something that’s better, so you continually strive to make it better. That will always be so, and that’s good, because there ought to be growth. (p. 228)

The scope of Highlander’s goals meant that the school could enact dramatic shifts in its programming with changes such as moving from labor education to Civil Rights education, and it could stay true to its central principles, which have always remained larger than any particular cause. It also means that the work of Highlander, regardless of whether the school exists in the future or not, will never be complete and will be ongoing with global and local relevance.

This principle is likewise at the center of the work of the Hopa Mountain. Hopa Mountain’s central goal—to invest in rural and tribal citizen leaders who are working to improve education, ecological health, and economic development (Hopa Mountain, n.d., para. 5)—is also one that “grows as you go along,” and it means that Hopa Mountain’s programs have as their

center the dreams and ambitions of community members. As with Highlander, on the surface Hopa Mountain’s goals might appear disparate for its programs covering many bases that include Native nonprofits (Strengthening the Circle), rural family literacy (Story-Makers), youth leadership, and support of Native scholars (Indigenous Scholars of Promise and Native Science Fellows Program). What connects these programs and the other ones supported by Hopa Mountain over its history is the focus on supporting leaders who can work for the ongoing (and never ending) improvement of their communities on their terms.

This flexibility allows Hopa Mountain to continually pay attention to needs as they are expressed within communities and to collaboratively create programs that address those needs. Hopa Mountain’s capabilities for doing this work include a committed board and staff along with over 100 volunteers that are knowledgeable about strength-based approaches to rural and tribal community change and dedicated to supporting one another through the process. This is long-term work and requires the passion and dedication to work both publically and confidentially with rural and tribal citizen leaders as they engage in long-term systemic efforts to increase educational and economic opportunities in their hometowns. By emphasizing our shared philosophy and ways of working that include deep listening, our board, staff, and volunteers are able to breathe life into our core principles.

Ought to Be

These two principles that community members are the best positioned to identify and solve local problems and that the best goals to pursue will by definition be unachievable are preconditions to the last principle Hopa Mountain shares with Highlander. The principle of change is that rather than helping people live better in the world as it is, Hopa Mountain and Highlander focus instead on working toward a world as it “ought to be.”

Highlander’s co-founder and long-term executive director, Myles Horton, put it this way when he addressed a workshop for teachers in the Citizenship Schools, which were the literacy classes offered

throughout the South in order to help African-Americans pass the voter registration tests designed specifically as tools of disfranchisement. When Horton addressed the teachers in 1961, the Citizenship Schools had grown beyond Highlander's capacity and were being transferred to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, headed at that point by Martin Luther King, Jr.

In that speech, Horton (1961) addressed what made Highlander unique as a school. Like other schools, Highlander started "from where we are," with "what *is* in our lives." But Horton argued that most schools stop there as well, rarely moving beyond a vision of the world as it is. Horton bluntly stated that from Highlander's perspective such learning as that "a man might learn to read and write in order to feather his own nest. Or he might learn to make a motion in a business meeting in order to manipulate the meeting" had "no value at all—they are negative, and may even produce a disservice." Rather, Horton stated,

We have discovered that there was a magnetic pull up in the direction of what *ought to be*—human brotherhood, dignity, and democracy. We have kept our eyes firmly on the *ought to be*.

....We are getting results not only in terms of reading and writing but in terms of intelligent first class citizens—hundreds and hundreds of them—simply because we began by assuming that they *could* be citizens.

....The difference is not the method....The goal—and I think it is brotherhood, democracy, a kind of *world, in which we need to live*—must be constantly in view—and when this is so then we really have a different kind of teaching, not in terms of mechanics, but in terms of philosophy, which means a different kind of program.

Unless Highlander's education could foster a movement toward "a kind of world, in which we need to live," Horton found it at best without value and at worst counter-productive, a disservice.

Hopa Mountain has been most shaped by this philosophy of Highlander. This belief that working with community members toward goals that by definition can never be reached will always keep Hopa Mountain focused on the world as it ought to be with the goal of

living in and creating together the world in which we need to live. All of Hopa Mountain's programs— from the youth leadership programs that were the foundation of Hopa Mountain's work 10 years ago to the Indigenous Scholars of Promise program developed 2 years ago—emphasize developing leaders who can support community growth toward a more equitable and just society. Following from Horton, if Hopa Mountain's training of leaders only helped individuals create a better place for themselves in the world as it is, Hopa Mountain would have failed in its mission. Instead, Hopa Mountain trains leaders who will play a role in the ongoing development of communities toward increasing "human brotherhood, dignity, and democracy." To do this, they will focus not on improving their own lives but on working within the community to imagine the world as it ought to be.



Progress Toward Goals

Hopa Mountain has made significant progress with many of its short-term goals which involve training rural and tribal citizen leaders and organizing gatherings of them in support of early childhood literacy, youth development, and Native nonprofit development. Board, staff and volunteers have also been able to increase the number of resources that are available to Native nonprofits in our region and increase these leaders' access to regional networks, including funding resources. Progress toward our short-term goals are measured through more organizations, social relationships, networks, and opportunities that reduce

poverty and improve graduation and economic conditions.

The longer-term goals of improving access to quality community (informal) education, increasing economic resources to decrease high poverty rates, and improving health and well-being are still to be realized. These goals require long-term education and support to fundamentally restructure opportunities in rural and tribal communities. We want to encourage people everywhere to think critically about our region and the growing economic inequality. We need to encourage rural and tribal leaders and others everywhere to develop decision-making abilities, get involved in social issues, and take action.

Long-term progress will ultimately be realized through efforts of working in support of citizen leaders to construct new opportunities for youth and adults in rural and tribal communities. This long-term progress is predicated on social change and true democracy where everyone is valued and has a chance to reach their full potential.

Conclusion

We write this piece not only to highlight the ways in which Hopa Mountain has been deeply shaped by the theories and practices of Highlander, nor do we wish to boast about the similarities. Instead, we write this piece because of our deep belief that Highlander provides a rich and deep model for community education toward social justice. Like Highlander and deeply shaped by its philosophy and practice, Hopa Mountain is at its heart an educational institution, focused on finding, training, and supporting Native and rural community members who will become leaders toward positive social change. Hopa Mountain's relationship with the leaders with whom it works with is based on deep reciprocity; the leaders teach Hopa Mountain how to understand and begin to address local challenges, and Hopa Mountain supports the growth of leaders who can aid in community self-determination.

Hopa Mountain and Highlander believe that the only process that will develop sustainable, just, and meaningful change must begin at the grassroots level. By supporting communities and leaders in working

toward the change they identify as necessary, Hopa Mountain continually imagines, and re-imagines, the world as it ought to be. We learned this from Highlander, and we believe that the example of Highlander can be put to work locally and globally and that the central principles of Highlander can be adapted and re-shaped by schools and organizations determined to imagine the possibilities of a more democratic and more just social order. "Highlander is an idea," Horton once said, about the confiscation of Highlander's property by the State of Tennessee in 1962. "You can't padlock an idea" (Moyers, 1982, p. 250). We know that the idea of Highlander will continue to reach beyond its original context to offer deep insights about how to work in the community to create a world in which we need to live. Through Hopa Mountain's investments in rural and tribal citizen leaders and a mission grounded in philosophy, we are committed to Horton's (1990) vision that "the future is not something that you have later on; it is something that you build now. The way you do things today determines the future you will have" (p. 9).

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