

Building Bridges Over the Hills

Overcoming partisan divides between Northern liberals and Appalachian conservatives

by Nicole Li

IN THE WAKE OF the 2016 presidential election, skyrocketing political polarization underscored deep ideological divides in the American electorate, perpetuating harmful stereotypes of opposing parties and biased echo chambers. Choosing to challenge rather than accept the permanence of these divisions, an unlikely partnership between liberal New Englanders and conservative Appalachians emerged. Founded in 2017, the **Hands Across the Hills (HATH)** project seeks to build empathy and unity between diverging perspectives through structured dialogue and cultural exchange.

HATH bridges together two communities with vastly different voting patterns, histories, socioeconomic classes, and education profiles. **Leverett** is a small town (population 1,800) in the Pioneer Valley of rural western Massachusetts; 85% of its residents voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016. Leverett is considered a highly educated community, located within the Five College area encompassing Amherst College, Hampshire College, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst. According

to the most recent county census, 93.4% of adults graduate high school and 10.7% live in poverty. By contrast, **Letcher County** (population 20,000) encapsulates eastern Kentucky coal country, where 80% of residents voted for Donald Trump in 2016. Only 77.8% of Letcher County adults finish high school and 24.4% experience poverty. Letcher County's local economy depends almost entirely on revenue generated from coal mines.

Mystified and devastated by the outcome of the 2016 election, a group of Leverett residents sought to reach across the aisle and better understand a community that voted differently.

After the election, the **Leverett Peace Commission**, a long-standing community group, called a meeting at the local library to grieve at electoral loss, express anger, and talk about what actions might be done. Eighty eager community members showed up. Out of this meeting a bridging committee of more than twenty residents formed. It was clear that in order to connect with and understand a part of the country that voted



Hands Across the Hills members during April 2018 immersion weekend in Letcher County, Kentucky. Photographs courtesy of HATH.

for Trump they needed to find an overwhelmingly red community to partner with. In fact, a large lesson learned was how important it was to find an individual from “the other side” able to gather a group who might decide to engage in bridging. Through a connection with a Kentucky-based community organizer, Ben Fink, members of the bridging committee found a partner in Letcher County. These communities agreed to engage in dialogue and community building and called themselves Hands Across the Hills. First, the residents of Letcher County visited Leverett for a weekend in October 2017. Later, Leverett residents traveled to Letcher County, Kentucky in April 2018. Through carefully facilitated “dialogue circles” and cultural immersion activities, both parties connected with the intention not to change minds and votes but to simply understand how each person’s vote came out of their unique history and lives.

About 25 individuals participated in the exchange weekends – an experience that participants described

as “transformative.” Sharon Dunn, a Leverett resident, recounted how the dialogue circles enabled both parties to deepen compassion, enlarge hearts, and “see each other as humans, not just voters.” Strong and meaningful relationships, such as her friendship with Kentuckian Gwen Johnson, “have blossomed out of the contact that [they’ve] kept over these six years.” HATH’s model of open-minded and respectful discourse represents a successful example of bridging across ideological divides.

This case will recount how the exchange weekends facilitated bridging across political and ideological divides. Featuring the voices of several HATH members, the case draws from interviews conducted with Sharon Dunn (Leverett, MA), Gwen Johnson (Letcher County, KY), and the late Paula Green (Leverett, MA), who co-led HATH with Fink and served as its principal dialogue facilitator and project designer.

Identifying a Breaking Dynamic

HAVING SPRUNG INTO ACTION in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, HATH primarily formed with the goal of addressing widening political and ideological divides. In the words of Leverett resident and HATH leader Paula Green, 2016 was a dark time when:

Different groups of people were demonized by other groups of people and called rough and uncouth things. Prejudices and stereotypes had been lying low in our country for a long time, but there was suddenly permission to name the worst about the other. Without face to face and hand to hand connection, we don't really know the other and don't want to know the other.

Green perceived the post-election despair and shock felt among Leverett residents as symptomatic of breaking – liberals and conservatives too often alienated themselves from the outgroup, impeding tolerance, respect, and empathy for those with different viewpoints.

The breaking dynamic that Green described was also deeply felt among conservative Letcher County residents. Reflecting on the source of sentiments of polarization and distrust in Letcher County, Johnson lamented that “most of the time *we're talked about, not talked to, and certainly not listened to.*” Johnson blames divisive news sources for painting an inaccurate portrait of mountain communities like hers and exacerbating harmful prejudices and stereotypes. In an interview, Johnson explained that journalists and videographers come to Letcher County to capture

sensational ‘poverty porn’ in which “we’ve been painted so horribly by the media all these decades.” Johnson elaborated, “The whole nation thinks we’re lazy and slothful and ignorant and it’s just not true and makes me really angry.” She noted that reporters that don’t know her community tend to interview the most accessible people – the few individuals staying at home – rather than the citizens working long hours in the coal mines. As a result, those outside Appalachia do not truly understand the hardworking lifestyle of those living in areas where coal is the bedrock of an over a hundred year mono-economy. Such inimical generalizations that “our folks don’t wanna work” perpetuate rural Kentuckians’ long history of being ridiculed and mocked by northern liberals. It is no surprise, then, that when the Leverett residents first reached out to her local community center, Johnson had initially suspected that “it was another ‘save the dumb hillbillies’ ploy.” While the Kentuckians resented the arrogance of non-locals, Leverett residents feared being written off as “northern elites” who lacked empathy and “never suffered” themselves. Such long-standing stereotypes and mischaracterizations of “the other” fuel deeper divides, greater distrust, and more intense breaking.

Johnson explained that a jarring disconnect between popular perception and the reality of Appalachian culture makes Letcher County a deeply misunderstood population, further complicating the breaking dynamic. While stereotypes portray rural Kentuckians as lazy and hostile, Johnson depicted coal miners

BREAKING between humans is a response driven by fear and isolation, when we turn inward only to what we know and who we know.

A **breaking dynamic** exists when one group turns against an ‘outsider’ group; the ‘**otherness**’ and threat of the out-group can build psychological or physical walls between the two groups.

In this case, breaking manifests in political polarization exacerbated by ideological self-alienation and divisive stereotyping.

as marginalized victims of coal company greed. In Letcher County, all household income and funding for public infrastructure depend on coal revenue, and this dependency enables corporate exploitation. Many residents pay the ultimate price. “My daddy was a miner. Both grandpas were miners. My mom had three brothers killed in coal mines. The only brother I had was killed in coal mines,” Johnson shared in an interview. In a community whose economic stability so heavily relies on coal, Johnson cast her vote for Trump as she reasoned that she could not consciously support the Democrats’ war on coal, which would crush her and her neighbors’ livelihood. Johnson elaborated:

We don’t have an aversion to science. We know about climate change. We know about carbon emissions. But at the end of the day, what does it matter that the planet is going to hell if you can’t feed the children and clothe them.

Thus, for Johnson, stereotypes and a general lack of public understanding about coal country culture perpetuates the breaking dynamic that precludes true bridging to belonging.

Hands Across the Hills members Gwen Johnson (*left*) and Sharon Dunn (*right*).



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Action Toward Bridging

RECOGNIZING THE VALUE of organic, face-to-face encounters to address the breaking dynamic across two politically distinct communities, HATH organized three immersion weekends of dialogue and cultural exchange. The encounters were hosted in both Leverett, Massachusetts and Letcher County, Kentucky in fall 2017, spring 2018, and fall 2019. While the pandemic has postponed in-person gatherings, the two communities have continued to meet on Zoom.

At the heart of the 3-day weekend gatherings was structured and intentional dialogue, during which participants openly discussed feelings and built trust for one another. Dialogue sessions were interspersed with activities such as potluck meals, music, excursions, theater, dance, singing, and sightseeing, during which visitors experienced the host community's culture firsthand. Additionally, visitors were intentionally placed in homestays rather than hotels, allowing hosts and visitors to learn the intimacy of each other's family lives.

HATH's late leader Paula Green, who worked for decades in peacebuilding in post-conflict areas of Europe, Middle-East, and Africa, was the designer of the three-day weekend immersive experience. Recounting the itinerary of the Kentuckians' trip to Leverett, she intentionally organized "day one to build community, day three to say goodbye to the community and make future plans, and day two to deal with the hard things" such as Trump and hot button social issues. The order of these objectives was crucial; it was necessary to "start with talking about family rather than politics ... because it gave us a window into each other's souls." By listening to each other's family backgrounds and history, participants began to see each other's humanity. In an interview, Green recalled:

We learned what it was like to be from a family in Letcher County, Kentucky, where fathers, brothers, sons, and uncles were dying from black lung disease or maimed or killed in coal accidents. We learned what [Johnson] meant that all of them had

coal dust in their veins because coal was truly the only occupation. We learned what it was like to live in a coal camp.

While Leverett residents began to grasp the meaning of coal to the people of Letcher County, the Kentucky contingent had the opportunity to listen to the stories of Leverett families. For the first time, the Kentuckians, many of whom hailed from families with several generations of Appalachian roots and had little experience traveling outside of their immediate area, heard the stories of several Leverett participants who were "first-generation Americans whose parents escaped the Holocaust." Green emphasized the importance of sharing family histories to building trust and belonging:

The more [the Kentucky] people told their personal stories, the more the people from Western Massachusetts stood up and cheered, and the more they cheered, the more the Kentucky people spoke, so it was a lovely loop of generating positive regard, and the Kentucky people felt really accepted and listened to as they had not been listened to.

Following the initial storytelling exchange, participants entered into dialogue circles in which they addressed the "elephants in the room" – gun control, religion, abortion. To ensure full participation and safety, dialogue circle members agreed on guidelines such as careful listening, confidentiality, and respectful speaking. Participants on both sides of the divide were reminded that they "were not in the business of trying to change each other's opinions or push each other to recant on their vote and vote differently," which they acknowledged would have been unproductive and frustrating. Rather, Green explained, "what we wanted to do was to deepen our understanding of other people with other votes, other perspectives, and other life experiences." To this end, sessions were designed to deepen understanding and empathy. The ensuing debates were "bumpy but also respectful. We kept reminding ourselves to listen to stories and open our hearts and not argue or counteract." While

discussion expectedly got heated at times, Green maintained that “we were ready because we had built a sweet foundation of caring and connection on the first day.”

HATH’s model of bridging through structured dialogue exemplifies a communication strategy that optimizes finding commonalities. The process begins with identifying one’s personal values and sharing

them in a way that others can understand. Listening and speaking across divides entails respecting and affirming the voice and dignity of every person, encouraging collective growing and learning, building community and trust, repairing misunderstandings and animosity, and tackling controversial issues together.

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BRIDGING is a project aimed at crossing identity-based lines. It addresses a breaking dynamic in order to develop a ***cohesive, more inclusive, durable, and more expansive “we”*** that can be identified and recognized to bring about belonging and greater social justice.

To “bridge” involves two or more people or groups coming together across acknowledged lines (such as race and/or power dynamics inherent within those social structures) of difference in a way that both affirms their distinct identities and creates a new inclusive “we” identity. The new “we” that results need not agree on everything, or even very much; but its members should have a ***shared empathy*** and ***lasting stake in one another***. All its members should also experience an authentic sense of belonging. Bridging rejects all strict “us versus them” framings, but without erasing what is different and unique in each party.

Bridging, in this case, entails structured and intentional dialogue that enables individuals from vastly different cultural backgrounds and positions on the ideological spectrum to overcome animosity and assumptions and ***embrace a shared humanity***.



Above: Hands Across the Hills members dance during first immersion weekend in Leverett, Massachusetts, October 2017.
Below: Dialogue Across Divides workshop in Leverett, October 2021.

Outcome — Moving Towards Belonging

THE MOST IMPORTANT OUTCOME of the experience with HATH is that participants on both sides were able to see beyond the stereotypes and recognize their shared humanity. Reflecting on the immersion weekend in Leverett, Johnson noted that “suddenly we became very human to each other. Before we arrived we were cardboard cutout figures in their minds.” Appreciation for this humanity has enabled the formation of lasting friendships – bonds stronger than political differences even though those differences remain.

“We gained this cheering section,” Johnson said in reference to her Leverett friends. “Whatever’s going on here is of interest to those folks in Leverett and whatever’s going on up there is of interest to us.” When watching the news, both communities have the other community’s wellbeing in mind:

When news broke that Black Jewel miners were denied their pay and were picketing on the coal train tracks for weeks, we had a cheering section in Leverett for the miners. There’s so many [in the Leverett community] that are Jewish and whenever some anti-Semitic violent act happens, my first thought is ‘oh my goodness, how are they? Are they okay?’

The two communities send condolences back and forth. “I lost my mom and was showered with so much kindness from Leverett.”

Furthermore, dialogue circles have enabled both parties to discover common ground and appreciate similarities. As Johnson recounted, “the things that we’ve been able to agree on in HATH are the things we all have in common – we all care about family, community, each other, and we want a better life for the kids, education for the children, food on the table and those sort of things.” Through intentional dialogue, HATH members succeeded in bridging differences, developing meaningful relationships, and building a more peaceful community.

Beyond personal connections, HATH participants spoke to the tremendous broadening effect of the

immersive experience on their own worldview. “We’ve all changed,” Dunn remarked, “Our eyes have widened, and so have our hearts.” During a virtual debate, Kip Fonsh of Leverett concurred, “For me, the trip of the Kentucky people up here and our corresponding trip down there was a real eye opener. It didn’t change all of my opinions but I think I understand the dilemma that the Kentuckians that we met face in their everyday struggles to survive.” Johnson echoed Dunn and Fonsh’s sentiment: “the whole exchange and listening to people of different views – all of those differences have broadened my consciousness.”

Overall, HATH members have been positive about the outcomes and the relationships that they have formed. HATH decided to offer their bridging project as a template for peacebuilding projects in other communities and created the Dialogue Across Divides project, an intensive 3-day in-person training program that teaches the skills to bridge the partisan and ideological divisions that threaten our democracy. The workshop models critical dialogue skills, such as organizing groups of participants for long-term collaboration across political and cultural barriers, creating skillful questions and prompts, negotiating

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and defusing intercultural and interpersonal tensions, integrating art, music, theater, and storytelling into dialogue and organizing work, and launching a plan to organize and start a project in your own communities. Dialogue Across Divides extends HATH’s work on bridging across the conservative/ liberal split to tackling conversations about race, ethnicity, and class. Held in Leverett in October 2021, the first training drew 30 participants representing nonprofits, museums, universities, and collaboratives around the Northeast. Ultimately, Dialogue Across Divides exemplifies one practical way that HATH seeks to “share the knowledge of what we’ve learned” and engage a wider audience in their bridging work.

Beyond these trainings, HATH has pursued other means of sharing their bridging approach with the public. For example, Johnson collaborated with a Leverett resident to compose dual opinion columns, published in newspapers in both the Pioneer Valley and Letcher County, featuring two different voices on vaccines. Additionally, HATH has organized multiple well-attended Zoom events in which two HATH members with opposing viewpoints discussed questions like “do we trust the government?”

Fundamentally, HATH believes that America is not divided beyond repair, and that building solidarity across political divides is possible anywhere but requires commitment, vulnerability, and perseverance. HATH recognizes that everyone’s politics are rooted in their cultures, families, and stories, and everyone deserves to be respected, heard, and loved as they are. With respect to her overall experience with HATH, Johnson stated firmly that “it was well worth doing and I’m so glad that I did it.”

HATH members engage in a “fishbowl activity” during October 2019 immersion weekend in Leverett. The activity features four individuals in discussion while an outer circle listens.



BELONGING describes values and practices where no person is left out of *our circle of concern*. Belonging means more than having just access, being seen, or feeling included. It means that every member has a *meaningful voice*, that their *well-being is considered*, and that they have the *opportunity to participate* in the design of political, social, and cultural structures. Belonging includes the right to both *contribute* and *make demands* upon society and political institutions.

Here, moving towards belonging is evidenced by the development of *meaningful* and *enduring friendships*. The formation of these friendships reflects the success of Hands Across the Hills’ bridging project, as both communities have come to appreciate each other as so much more than the party for which they vote.

Further readings and resources

- If you are interested in learning more about the work of Hands Across the Hills, please visit their website at handsacrossthehills.org. You can also learn about the [Dialogue Across Divides program here](#).
- Robin Young, a correspondent for Boston-based radio station WBUR, produced a number of audio pieces featuring the organization including a 2018 story “[Conservatives In Kentucky, Liberals In Massachusetts Try To Bridge Political Divide](#)” and a 2020 story “[Respect And Friendship Don’t Depend On Shared Politics, Say Those Who Have Bridged The Divide.](#)” The stories both feature Gwen Johnson and the late Paula Green. More recently, [Johnson spoke with WBUR](#) about outreach and relief efforts following flash floods in Kentucky in August 2022.

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Leverett residents participate in a dialogue circle during their immersion weekend in Letcher County, April 2018.

