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# Gurney's Homefolks

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NICK SMITH, JACK WRIGHT, AND ROBERT GIPE

**Dee Davis** is president of the Center for Rural Strategies, in Whitesburg, Kentucky. He interviewed his friend Gurney Norman in the *Daily Yonder*. <https://dailyyonder.com/author-gurney-norman-in-conversation-with-dee-davis/2021/08/09/>

**Pam Meade** lives in White Oak, Kentucky, near West Liberty. Her paintings show her love and respect of nature, people, stories, and life in Eastern Kentucky as well as her commitment to addressing social issues in the region and the wider world. She uses colored pencil and watercolor sketches, found paper and food packaging, metal, text, acrylic and oil paint, along with other items to create her paintings. She believes artists will help shape a positive future in Appalachia, Kentucky, and areas beyond. She created art for two of Gurney Norman's books: *Ancient Creek* and the hardback edition of *Allegiance*.

**Mandi Fugate Sheffel** was born and raised in Red Fox, Kentucky. She is a graduate of Eastern Kentucky University who found her passion for writing and storytelling at the Appalachian Writers Workshop at the Hindman Settlement School. Her personal essays and opinion pieces can be found in *Still: The Journal*, *Lexington Herald-Leader*, and the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. Her forthcoming personal essay collection, *The Nature of Pain*, will be released in 2025 through the University Press of Kentucky. She currently owns and operates Read Spotted Newt, an independent bookstore in the coalfields of Eastern Kentucky.

**Nick Smith** is a communist poet, farmer, and liberation activist from Knox County, Kentucky.

**Jack Wright** is a writer, storyteller and musician with work appearing on NPR, PBS, June Appal Recordings and in Hollywood films. His articles about Appalachia have appeared in *Independent Spirit*, *Iron Mountain Review*, *Appalachian Journal*, and other publications. In 2007 he produced a book and CD anthology, *Music of Coal*. He is a retired professor from Ohio University Film School.

**Robert Gipe**, see pages 182, 204, and p. 247.

**Robert Gipe:** Now we're turning to "Gurney's Homefolks." These are all folks who have worked with Gurney Norman, lived and learned and loved with Gurney in the Appalachian region. As we get started, we'd like to lift up a prayer for our friend Angie DeBord, who was supposed to have been on this panel from Southwest Virginia, but she's home with the Covid. She knew Gurney from the earliest days of Roadside Theater. [Angelyn DeBord's essay "Granny & Gurney" appears on p. 282]

Let's start with each of you giving us a minute or two on how you know Gurney. Help the assembled understand the context of your presence here, and then we'll go back around. Nick, would you like to start?

**Nick Smith:** I am a poet and a farmer in Knox County. I first met Gurney in 2002 as a student at UK. I came up here with the idea of being a lawyer, but I went to a reading one night with Gurney and I left transformed. Since then, I've been obsessed with art and justice.

**Jack Wright:** I met Gurney when I came to work at Appalshop in 1973. Appalshop was climbing a big hill making a movie on *Divine Right's Trip*, and so Gurney would come up to Whitesburg, and we got to be really good friends.

**Dee Davis:** I met Gurney in 1975 when I came to work at *Mountain Review*. By the time I failed that job in Appalshop, I met him when he came in to read "Ancient Creek" for the June Appal recording. And I'll tell the rest later.

**Pam Oldfield Meade:** One thing I learned from Gurney is that you write down your first sentence when you're giving a presentation. (I forgot to do that today.) I met Gurney through Appalshop. I was here at UK. I was leaving right about the time he was arriving. I was in agriculture, so I doubt we would have crossed paths anyway. I really got to know him through Appalshop. It's like so many people have said, what a connection! It's been a wonderful thing all these years. It's been about 40 years.

**Mandi Fugate Sheffel:** I met Gurney in the spring of 2019 at a memorial reading for Jim Webb at the Hazard Community College. I had admired his work and him as an activist in the region. I followed closely the way Gurney had led the charge against mountaintop removal mining. (So I had a bit of a fangirl moment. I don't know that he knew that at the time.) We had a very short exchange after the reading. And something in that exchange—I don't know how, but he figured out I was a writer in that brief conversation. We exchanged a lot of emails after. And I'll leave that as a cliffhanger for now.

**Pam Meade:** This panel is titled Homefolks, and that's the thing about Gurney: he certainly loves his homefolks from Eastern Kentucky. I mean, he loves everybody, people from a lot of places, but he certainly made me feel valid and special and has meant so much to me. I'm not a writer, but I did attend ten years of writing workshops he led at Hazel Green Academy. I got to stay in the dorm and hang out with all the writers. I love reading, so I like being around writers. I am a visual artist, and doing that informed my paintings and is important, I think.

I worked with an arts organization in West Liberty, my hometown. Gurney's niece, Sharon, was living in West Liberty, so it came time for our annual Sorghum Festival and the parade. Next thing I know, she has Gurney as the Grand Marshal at the Sorghum Festival Parade, which was very exciting. With my arts group, I scheduled a screening of *Fat Monroe*. It was on the



Mandi Fugate Sheffel, Pam Meade, and Dee Davis

marquee at the movie theater. There were also readings by him and Angelyn DeBord, who unfortunately is missing today because she's got the old Covid.

So Gurney's paths and mine have crossed over the years, at Hazel Green Academy and other places. Gurney was very instrumental in helping to plan the Where Art Meets Ed conference. One of the most important things he did was, that morning of the conference, he and Judi Jennings went down to the store to get more toilet paper. It was an emergency, and he was there for us. [Laughter]



Jack Wright and Nick Smith

I have to mention I had the wonderful good fortune of getting to design two of his book covers. I did the hardback version of *Allegiance* and also *Ancient Creek*. [Applause] What a wonderful thing that was, just to get to talk to him about his books. He's telling me all these words, and I'm writing them down. I write them on the canvas and just absorb all that. It was difficult, I'll just tell you, to do something good enough for those books. But I was glad to have the chance.

Over and over, people have said just how important he's been in support of their writing career. He makes you and what you do feel important. Until I heard that from so many people, I didn't realize—well, I thought that was just me!—I didn't know he did that for everybody!

**Nick Smith:** First, I want to say thanks to Crystal and Frank and Kristen and Lisa and to all the staff who keep us and these buildings running. Without people writing the emails and making the phone calls and changing the light bulbs and the air filters, we wouldn't have this event and these facilities to do this stuff.

To say what Gurney means to me I'll say the most important thing about Gurney is just *the way he is in the world*. I've collected some brief quotes I want to lay on you and talk about for a minute. The first one is from a letter that Gurney wrote to me on the occasion of my 21st birthday. It's very short: "I live in myth much of the time." That has sort of been a guidepost to me throughout my adult life. Gurney also famously said that "Integration is the quest, whether for the individual or the community or the whole earth, to knit itself together once again."

One thing that hasn't been talked about enough so far is Gurney's connection to justice movements through Myles Horton and the Highlander School and Don West and all those folks. Of course, once you're talking about that, then you're talking about political activists Bayard Rustin, Rosa Parks, and Bobby Seale. Gurney could so easily envision a way that we were all connected to these people intimately, through the geography of the spaces and the world that we inhabit.

That leads me to this, which I think embodies Gurney: it's from Angela Davis, of course, a great Southern thinker: "You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world, and you have to do it all the time."

And then this last one, which comes by way of Nikky Finney, who was my teacher at UK, along with Gurney. She received this from Toni K. Bambara, her great friend and teacher, who says, "Don't leave the arena to the fools."

The way that all that comes together is that if we're talking about integration, we also have to have *liberation*, and we have to have *imagination*. I think Gurney really embodies the use of imagination. He imagines the way the world can be. He asks, how can we carry it forward?

You [Pam Meade] were speaking about how much Gurney loved his community. Of course, Gurney's community connected with the Highlander School. Myles Horton said, "You can't be a revolutionary and you can't want to change society if you don't love people. There's no point in it without loving people." For the few past months, and years, we've all been bombarded with images of terrible things going on around the world—in the Congo, the Sudan, Haiti, Palestine, Myanmar, Yemen. I think that we owe it to our community and to Gurney to revive some of those old ways of thinking of how those folks organize their lives in such a way that they didn't have to rely on these machines that are killing us.

Gurney's writings throughout his life, most particularly in *Ancient Creek*, but also, of course, in the Wilgus stories and *Kinfolks*, are about the return to home. They really give us the blueprint for how we can do that.

And most importantly, he has a way of empowering us all to be visionary for our own communities. He really worked to place himself within the archetype of the narrative of the story was he that in. And by doing that, there's a lot more that we can overcome together than we can do on our own. Thank you. [Applause]

**Dee Davis:** A few years ago, a reporter was writing about me, or something I was doing, and called Robert Gipe for a comment. Robert made some comments that were *very* generous, and then afterwards, I called him, and said, "What's up with this?" He said, "They told me you were dead." [Laughter]

Since Gurney is still among us, I'm not going to really go into hagiography, but I do want to talk about what it was like to see Gurney. The thing I think about in literature, Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh*, everybody waiting for him to show up. At Appalshop, we just waited all the time for Gurney. He was this heroic figure from Northern California. We knew some cool adults, but not cool in this way. When he showed up, he would ask about your work. He would encourage you, pat you on the back, but he would also get a pan of warm water, get on his knees, and wash your feet. Literally. It felt kind of weird, but it was very cool because you knew you were an inventor, right? You're in a story. You're an historian. You were being honored. It was cosmic, and we would be talking about straddling time and space, and talking about Northern California and

East Kentucky, and it was like we were *in* the Jack Tale. We would talk about things like Will and Tom and Jack and Mutsmeg. It was an adventure.

More recently, I've been thinking about Gurney's parents. They had some bad luck. As a little boy, he ended up living with his grandparents, so he was only about a mile away. They lived in the Walkertown section of Hazard, and his granddad ran the commissary in Allais, which was like Walmart. Gurney was the Prince of Allais, and it was a wonderful life. His granddad raised him on made-up stories, and the adventures of Daniel Boone, and radio dramas,

and World War II dispatches. Because of this, Gurney grew up with this sense of what was possible there in that place.



Pam Meade and Dee Davis

His granddad was a learned man, so he was asked to type up the manuscript for *The Autobiography of "Old Clabe Jones"* [James Claybourne Jones (1826-1914), Eastern Kentuckian, Civil War veteran, feudist] which, if you're not familiar, may be the best piece of Appalachian literature other than *River of Earth*. Clabe Jones was a great Bad Man.

He had a Gatling gun, had his own militia, and his adventures are wonderful. And then Gurney got us to serialize it in *Mountain Review*, which is probably the only successful thing we ever published. Maybe. It was great.

At some point, Gurney decided that as two Hazard boys, it was our job to go find the grave of Clabe Jones. So we went to the city cemetery in Hazard and, sure enough, found it close to the entrance. That started 25 or 30 more years of showing up, reading that gravestone, and beginning to do a walking tour of Hazard, talking about murder and mayhem. Gurney would call and say, "I think our buddy Clabe's a little under the weather. We better go visit him." [Laughter] We'd go down there, and other people started coming with us.

When he was at *Hazard Herald*, Gurney himself had seen a killing right behind the courthouse. There was an out-of-control nephew and uncle and then a shooting, and he saw that. His grandmother had witnessed one of the other great Bad Men of the mountains, Calvin Clemmons, who ran off to Las Vegas when he was under some cloud and then sneaked back and assassinated the witness they had in the jail. His grandmother had seen that.

And I knew all the stories of Hazard, you know, when Cowboy Smith and Tommy Allen Combs drew Old West style from the family theater, when there was a Mexican standoff at the little inn, and for three hours the guys are holding guns on each other and the two young cops came with sub-machine guns and mowed them down, Bud Luttrell and Shorty Sizemore. And the story about the guy who got his throat slit at the Main Street pool room and made it to the Eightball Poolroom. And I remember for a month the sidewalk was sticky.



So I remembered all these stories of murders, trifling wives, and misunderstood husbands. There's a story of Houston Hogg, who has a statue dedicated to him here for breaking the color barrier in the SEC. Well, his great-grandfather was shot by an errant bullet in the French-Eversole war [dispute between Benjamin Fulton French and Joseph C. Eversole, 1887 to 1894]. We'd tell these stories. There's another story about a pedestrian going down when they were building Sterling Hardware and a concrete block came off and hit him in the head. Then the coroner, George Archer, comes with his stethoscope, runs out on Main Street, puts his stethoscope down, and says, "I pronounce this man dead from stoppage of the heart." [Laughter]

So it's a good time, telling stories. We would tell these stories. We spent a lot of time with these stories, bringing people in.

The great oral historian Allesandro Portelli came in. We taught him how to play Ms. Pac-Man. (He's still playing it.) Robert Stone, who wrote *Dog Soldiers* and *A Flag for Sunrise*, went with us to the Imperial Club, and we told him about the Highwayman shoot out there. All of a sudden, you look over and he's sweating bullets. It was good stuff.

Gurney tells a story about when he was a reporter, and Herman Wouk came in. Herman Wouk wrote *Winds of War* [1971] and *Caine Mutiny* [1951] and *Youngblood Hawk* [1962]. And Wouk was interested in doing research and talking to the power brokers there in Hazard. Gurney showed up and was trying to get an interview. He was pestering him and then he got a picture, and the flashbulbs kept going off at the wrong time. And then Gurney talks about being memorialized in *Youngblood Hawk* as "a skinny reporter in an ill-fitting suit."

So anyway, I'll talk about our connection to Main Street Hazard downtown. We'd go up to the offices where Dr. Rice Kirby, the dentist, had his office on the second floor. Gurney's grandmother, who preferred to be called Auntie, sent him to the dentist. But then somehow on a Saturday they forgot him there in the front office and left. And then about five o'clock she called for him, and Dr. Kirby went back and got him out. Gurney was still sitting there in the chair with the apron around him. We always talk about that as this connection to Hazard.

I want just to mention one more thing, which is this legacy of his being a *Hazard Herald* reporter. Gurney knew the publisher, Miss Nolan, and she liked him and hired him as a reporter. Well, it just so happens that while he's working there, the editor, Louise Hatmaker, gets caught having an affair *in flagrante delicto* there in the offices of the *Hazard Herald*. Miss Nolan fires her on the spot and makes Gurney the editor. So Gurney is the editor-in-chief of the *Hazard Herald*. He'd never really done that before.

Now, you fast-forward to modern times, and there's been all this literature about the history of the internet and what it comes from. It comes out that the architecture of the internet owes a lot to the *Last Whole Earth Catalog*. There's all this written criticism about how the style and both the content and imagery of the *Last Whole Earth Catalog* informs what the internet looks like now.

Now go back to like 1970. Gurney's sitting with all the folks at the catalog and Stewart Brand is asking, what do you think? Do you think we should do three columns or four? And they're all arguing back and forth. And he said, Gurney, what do you think? Gurney said the only thing he knew was the *Hazard Herald*, which was four columns. He said, I think it should be four columns. And Stewart said, Gurney, I think you're right. So when we're thinking about Gurney, we should know, well, really, he invented internet. [Laughter and Applause] Thank you.

**Jack Wright:** One thing I have really enjoyed about these last two days is they've reminded me of an old song I used to sing called "Give Me My Flowers While I'm Living and Let Me Enjoy Them While I Can." Well, UK, and Kathryn Engle, and all these great people have organized this, it has been a treat to be part of it. Thank you.

When I first met Gurney, he found out I had been in Vietnam. He said, "Jack, you have got to start writing about that." I had never considered myself a writer. I was a folksinger. He kept on bugging me about it, so I started trying to write about Vietnam. I'm going to read you an excerpt from a story that I've done. The title is "The Incident at An Lao River, 1967."

Memories are bullets. Some whiz by and only spook you. Others tear you open and leave you in pieces. —Richard Kadrey

To give you some background, my buddy Harry and I had picked up a group of prisoners from the POW compound at our encampment at LZ Two Bits [Landing Zone]. They were rice farmers. We loaded them up in a trailer and drove them down to the An Lao River at the village of Bong Son to fill sandbags. This is where I'll start:

The Papasans' bare backs were streaked with sweat from working in the sun. We gave them water. After about an hour and a half of labor, I decided we had enough for a load of bags. We had them pack the tools and the left-over, unused sandbags to the trailer.

Harry and I decided to let them take a bath in the water in a pooled stream that fed the river off to our right. The water was shallow in that section, and we could watch them more easily there. They had not had a bath in a long time. There was no bath in the POW compound. I pointed to the little pool of water and scrubbed my right hand up and down over my left shoulder as if I were washing myself and pointed back to the pool. They began to laugh and waded into the water and rolled up their pants legs. They embraced the water and after bathing they frolicked and splashed each other. I had been a lifeguard at Fort Sill back in Oklahoma, and memories from a more innocent time rushed by.

Finally it was time to leave. I motioned the men to come out of the water. They started wading back up to the bank and proceeded to the trailer for the ride back to the POW camp. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a figure dive into the water. I looked as he made his way out into the river where the current was quicker. I shouted to him, "No!" Then I began unlacing my boots to go after him. When I looked up, he had too much of a lead.

Pandemonium had broken out among the prisoners. I didn't know what they were saying. Harry yelled for him to come back and waved. I picked up my rifle and was shouting, "Dien cai dau, dien cai dau," meaning "You're crazy," in Vietnamese.

There were some Korean soldiers there too. We called them ROKs [Republic of Korea]. They ran over to see what was going on. Harry pointed to the prisoner in the water and said he had escaped.

I shouldered my M16 and started firing at the fleeing man. He was about 50 yards out in the river. The ROKs started firing too. The M1s made loud booms, cannon-like. He swam underwater and came up for air while the current swept him downstream. I aimed and waited for him to come up for air. When he did, I fired a short volley on semi-automatic and missed. He dove back under and then came back up high out of the water, arms outstretched, his face and chest facing us. I fired again, as did the ROKs. When I pulled the trigger, I saw a cloud of red burst out behind his head. He sank and never came up. We quit our firing.



Jack Wright

Two of the Vietnamese fishermen in a boat paddled out to where he had gone under. Finally drifting downstream, a short distance, they pulled his body to the surface and into the boat. Harry was watching with other prisoners. Their eyes were solemn as they looked straight out towards their comrade's body in the boat. They waited silently. Harry called into headquarters on the Jeep radio and explained what happened. He was informed that a truck would be dispatched to pick up the body and then for us to return to camp. Once the fishermen arrived ashore, people gathered around the dead man. A blue cast had begun to settle into the waxy white corpse, a grimace on his face, eyes squinched shut, and a small bloody hole in his forehead.

I could not make myself look at the back of his head. His right thumb also had a bullet hole through it. Later I wondered what his last seconds of life were like. Maybe after he was wounded in the hand, he realized he couldn't escape. Perhaps that's why he turned towards us and raised his chest out of the water and his arms outstretched to give himself up. I had to quit thinking about it, or his image would haunt my dreams for a lifetime. During the dire trip back to the POW compound, none of our seven captives spoke, nor looked at us. Anyway, we got them back to the POW camp okay.

My heart ran blue. It had all happened so fast. I felt something in that instant, something I had not suffered since first shooting a rabbit during my youth and having it die in my hand, a horror I had hoped I would never face again, never see again, never feel again. My mind seemed raw, tattered for the killing. Would it ruin me? The reckoning would come later, the pity of it, the horror and the grief of my act. Later in the night, it crawled its way to the surface. I got no comfort. It would not leave. I dared not to speak. That was in 1967.

Then the next part of the story is Frijole Beach, California, 1977.



At Frijole Beach seagulls hovered in the balmy draft and searched waves. The winded tufts of their underwings matched the whitecaps. My pal Gurney steered the tan Volkswagen bus into the parking lot. He cut the engine, reached into his bag, and pulled out a small prescription bottle. He dispensed two capsules of MDA and reached me one. We uncapped and poured the white powder into our beer bottles and headed down to the surf. After listening to the breakers and feeling the warm October air, we moseyed over past the beach to a berth of black lava rock, fissured by millennia of weather and waves.

The tide was ebbing, leaving small pools of water in the bowled fissures. We sat down. Gulls shrieked and strutted across the sand. The air was rich with salt. Gurney turned on a portable cassette recorder and began recording our conversation as our audio letter to an Army friend serving in Germany, Jeff Kiser. On that almost cloudless day, as the MDA seeped in, we chatted. Eventually I spoke about Vietnam, the first time I'd ever been able to talk about it, though I had returned home a decade earlier.

Finally, I told Gurney of a recurring dream regarding an incident at the An Lao River. I described the POW, a peasant, a rice farmer. He attempted to escape, swimming down the river. I had to shoot him.

When I finished my story, I looked down into the small pool of water in front of us, and there was a baby octopus trapped, not much bigger than my thumb. The delicate orange creature was struggling, its tiny tentacles reaching to find a way out of the enclosed pool of salt water.

Then Gurney spoke to me. "Jack, you said something interesting while you were telling that story. You mentioned a cloud of red after you shot him." I thought hard about it, not realizing I had said it, having been caught up in the moment of the nightmare. We talked on. The incident in Vietnam had lived in my disturbed dreams for ten years. The MDA had had an effect I had never experienced. It opened me up, lightening my heart. It heightened my empathy and made it easier for me to talk. But more importantly, a close friend had listened and responded to my story, ultimately freeing me to later write a song, "Cloud of Red," and sing about the event in the months to come in my music and storytelling performances.

As the sun sank lower, our time at Frijole Beach was drawing to a close. Gurney clicked off the recorder. I reached down and gently scooped up the little orange octopus into my palm. I walked out into the receding tide and returned it to the sea.

Thank you. [Applause]

**Mandi Fugate Sheffel:** So I think about my brief time of knowing Gurney and what a tremendous impact he's made on my life. As I hear everybody talking over the last two days, I really am coming to regret the fact that I never got to have a road trip with Gurney. Or maybe I'm fortunate to have not had to ride in a Bronco through the Kentucky River. We haven't got to spend a lot of time together. By the time I met Gurney, he wasn't doing many public appearances anymore.

But, as I said earlier, I think he saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. I know I didn't. I knew that I had some work and that I had been writing.

But I was processing grief, and I was processing the things I had done in active addiction. Writing was the way that I was working through those sorts of things. And he didn't know any of that. Our conversation was about Carr Creek basketball. He had no idea what I was writing.

So when I emailed him that night and sent him my work and he read it and got back to me, I have now come to find out how rare that is, that his response was that quick. There are some emails that just kind of go out there, and they either don't come back, or they come back a long time later. But he had taken the time to pick out passages and sentences and descriptions and described to me what he saw about my voice and language.

I have no formal training in writing. I was never a student of Gurney's in a classroom setting. I was a science major, so I knew how to write academically, but I knew nothing about creative writing. And the version that I sent him was very sloppy, and I would be mortified if anybody even saw it now. The fact that I sent it out to Gurney Norman just shows some confidence that I had that I sure don't have now.

I think a lot about the happenstance of me going to that poetry reading. I really hadn't been in that community, wasn't really involved in that sort of thing. A couple of friends of mine taught at the college and invited me to come. I knew it was a memorial for Jim Webb. You know, it was very happenstance. I think about that line in the documentary film we saw where Gurney says, "Everything that happened to me, happened by accident, but it all worked out." That's the way I feel most days, navigating my way through this community and the writing world, how it all is very serendipitous, and it all goes back to Gurney. I mean, he's the source of all of it.

So after we have the interaction at the poetry reading and he gets my work, he tells me I need to go to the Appalachian Writers Workshop. Like Chris Holbrook, I was from Knott County. I'm from Hindman. Yet I knew nothing of the Writers Workshop. I didn't even know that it existed. And I get there, and all these people are speaking of Hindman like it's this magical place, and I knew nothing about it growing up. So I saw it through different eyes, once I got there.

Gurney wasn't there that year, but he made sure I had a place to stay because I was not staying on campus. I was late getting in, commuting back and forth. He encouraged me to stay on campus, saying, "No, the good stuff happens at night. You need to be around the ring of chairs and the music. That's where the community happens. You've got to go at night. I'm going to arrange for you a place to stay." And so he does. Somehow they find room for me on campus. I stay a couple of nights. In fact, he was right because during that time, Robert Gipe introduces me to Nick Smith and started referring to me as "Gurney's girl" that whole week.

I understood Gurney differently in that place, the Work he was doing—with the capital *W*—because he had done it for Nick. I sit here this weekend, and I figure out that there are so many people he's done that for. I was like Pam—I thought I might have been "the special one." Come to find out, this is just what

he did. He just moved through the world and saw things in people that maybe they didn't see in themselves.

He also introduced me to George Ella Lyon that week. He said, "I want you to make sure that you meet George Ella." And I did. I had lunch one day with George Ella. And I was telling her that I was in recovery. George Ella, I can't remember exactly what you said, but my clean date matches up with one of your children's birthdays or your anniversary or something. We had a moment there, when I told her my clean date. Since I've gotten clean, I started paying attention for things like that now, just little nods as I move through the world of like, "OK, this feels good. This is where I'm supposed to be." So in that moment, I felt that. But Gurney was tending to me from afar. He wasn't there, but he made sure I was making the connections that I needed to make, and that I had a place to stay that weekend. I would have never thought I belonged there if he hadn't told me I did.

I'm going to try not to get emotional. I have lost a lot of confidence as a writer, the girl who sent him that messy manuscript had a fool's confidence that I don't have now. But there are moments when I think, "Gurney believed in me, so I'm going to keep going. I don't think he would have steered me wrong." I don't think he was one of these people who would say, Yeah, that's a good manuscript. You need to go to Hindman—if he didn't mean it. So those are the things that keep me moving in the process of trying to finish this book: you know, Gurney believed in me, so I'm going to finish it.

After Hindman and after Gurney's glowing remarks about the pages that I sent him, I was really feeling myself because Gurney Norman thought it was good. So I start sending out all this work and getting rejection after rejection after rejection. Well, so I go to an event at UK to see Gurney and George Ella in conversation. It was here on campus. I share with him after the event that that I'm struggling with getting published. I feel like I have things to say, and I want people to read them. And he said, "Well, if you want your work read that bad, then just write it on notecards, and pass it out." There was no stroking of my ego or any of that. He said, "Just write it down and pass it out then if you want it to be read." That stuck with me, so I just kept going. I think about the note cards a lot. I use note cards a lot when I write. I take notes on things I think people need to hear. That's because of Gurney.

In the time that followed after I met him, I opened a bookstore in Hazard, Kentucky. Read Spotted Newt. I'll give it a shameless plug here. If you guys ever find yourself in Hazard, stop by the bookstore. I don't think it's the first independent bookstore in Hazard, but the only one that I knew of in my lifetime. Gurney was the first person to come speak. He did my store opening event. That's another thing he's done. He gave me confidence to move through the world. That's past writing.

And I found a community in Hindman. I found people who are my friends today. That's my community. I admire them as writers, but I also admire them as people and friends. I think it's the most selfless community of people I've

ever been involved with. I see them put other people's work before their own, and it's almost like a duty that once you get to a certain level, then you turn around and look back and see who you can bring up behind you. Nobody is on this journey alone. I feel like there's a part of me, especially after these last couple of days, that probably stems from Gurney. I see a whole lot of what's still happening, even though he's not present at a lot of these events and workshops, he's very much here. It stems from Gurney Norman.

Last summer, it was the summer of the flood in Eastern Kentucky. I had the privilege of signing a book deal with University Press of Kentucky the morning of the flood. I signed the book deal at about 10 a.m. that morning, and we flooded that afternoon. That was a whirlwind of emotion, but you know, I think about this past four years. That's all it's been, four years. It's been a total whirlwind. I'm so honored to know Gurney Norman and so thankful that the universe saw fit that we crossed paths that night at that poetry reading. Thank you. [Applause]

**Robert Gipe:** We're out of time, but I wanted to ask this panel while they're assembled here to respond to one other thing. I think it's important for an urban audience in a university-based setting to understand how many vibrant cultural organizations and institutions exist in rural Appalachia, especially in Eastern Kentucky. So many of those organizations, some of which were founded, like Appalshop, during the era of Gurney Norman and Helen Lewis and Steve Fisher and others, who really started not just teaching in Appalachia and about Appalachia, but forming organizations.

And because of that, a couple things have happened. The floods had an existential impact on Appalshop and on the Hindman Settlement School. The culture wars in this country have had an impact on Pine Mountain Settlement School and on Hindman Settlement School. The other thing that I've noticed in the last few years is that because of the internet and other things—also the pressure that comes with being LGBTQ or a Person of Color, and living in Eastern Kentucky, combined with the technology—that more and more cultural institutions in the region have workers who live somewhere else. When I arrived in Whitesburg in 1989, I think one of the most striking things was that you had to be there. You had to live there to work there. You had to adapt to what this place was so that you could do the work that needed doing.

And I think that one of the super important things about Gurney Norman is that he is our man in Lexington. There were two things you could count on when you came to Lexington: that they let you use the bathroom at the Appalachian Center and that Gurney was our man in Lexington. He represented Eastern Kentucky and never turned loose of that place.

You know, we've had so many individual testimonials about "What Gurney did for me." Every one of the people up here has been enabled or encouraged to create something bigger than themselves in the region. Pam Bob [Pam Mead]

has been an arts organizer in Morgan County and done all kinds of things to make art a regular part of people's lives. Dee Davis and Jack Wright were both the beneficiaries of Gurney's vision about what Appalshop could be. Mandi owns an independent bookstore in Hazard, in addition to being a gifted writer. Nick Smith and Erik Tuttle put out *WIND*, one of the best literary magazines that I have ever seen, far beyond what most people would even think a literary magazine could be, all while they were undergraduates. What I've learned from them is that they were empowered by two things: (1) the university used to let students make as many free copies as they wanted at the Margaret King Library and (2) Gurney Norman. These organizations and institutions are fragile. They come and go, and sometimes they last. I wonder, before we break up this panel, if any of you have anything you would like to say in response to that.

**Nick Smith:** Since you bring up my undergrad days with my brother and co-editor Erik Tuttle over here, one thing we used to do a lot is think about how connected the world became once we met with Gurney. Gurney had a way of framing every moment as the possible beginning of a story, and one that you could look back on, once upon a time. Sometimes I still think to myself how small the world is. For example, I think about Gurney's work at the Highlander Center. So now, because of that connection, you're tied into the Civil Rights Movement. You're tied into Highlander's Guy and Candy Carawan, who knew Pete Seeger, who knew Ravi Shankar.

Or there's Gurney's time in California where he hung out with Ken Kesey, who was friends with Timothy Leary, who went on a speaking tour with G. Gordon Liddy, who did Watergate. So now you've got one, two, three steps of people from you, and you are tied into the zeitgeist or moment of time in the world. Gurney saw that so clearly. I think that's what you're referring to.

These institutions that we're part of are not abstract. They have places where they should exist, and they do their best work when they find themselves in the right part of the story where they belong. That's the staying power that Gurney brings about because he empowers us to do the work to do the same. We live in a world where we can have an impact, not just have something that happens to us from the outside.

**Dee Davis:** I've seen a lot of groups, seen a lot of organizations, and sometimes you're inspired and encouraged, and sometimes you're disappointed. It's hard over 10, 20, 30 years to keep a True North, to keep a focus on something special.

I'm thinking about Gurney at nine and his brother Jerry and his grandmother packing him up in a car on a Sunday and carrying him over to Letcher County and putting him off at the Stuart Robinson School. They didn't know they were being put in this boarding school, and they didn't know what was in front of them. Yet these loving people, these thoughtful educators, lifted up these boys, lifted up Gurney and set him on a course that didn't just change his trajectory, it changed a lot of people's trajectory. It changed the world.

What's important is to get a handle on that True North, right? To get a handle on the purposes that these organizations come together and try to pull



off—because, in the long run, they have capacity for doing the things that we need to do, certainly for doing the things we need to do in the mountains, where the poverty rates are the highest, and education rates pitifully low, and longevity is the worst in the country. I mean, we need these institutions, but more than the institutions, we need people of purpose and foresight who will commit themselves to doing what it takes to make these lives better.

**Robert Gipe:** Thanks to our panel. Let's have another round of applause for these good people.