LET'S TALK

Every May, the city of Cincinnati comes alive with the Appalachian Festival. People dance in bright colors to bluegrass music, eat great food, and celebrate the best that Appalachian traditions have to offer. The celebration has become a tradition in its own right, since they've been doing it for thirty-two years.

Appalachians are proud of their heritage and their people: actors George Clooney and Charles Bronson, President Grant, Jesse Jackson, Tommy Dorsey and his Big Band, *Roots* author Alex Haley. There are 26 million people of Appalachian descent living in thirteen Appalachian states—and another 15 million across the country.

Like Cincinnati's other immigrants—German, Irish, and Italian—Appalachians had high hopes and dreams when they arrived here. Hundreds of thousands of families moved to Northern cities like Cincinnati after World War II in search of jobs and a better life. Cincinnati has the most: 250,000 citizens. They settled in Over-the-Rhine, where they formed a community whose people watch out for one another.

Some people think of Appalachians as "hillbillies" or "poor white trash," continuing a tradition of bigotry, as old as the culture it's set against. Ironically, Americans too ignorant to know better read an Appalachian accent as a sign of ignorance. Larry Redden has learned a lot about stereotypes and how hurtful they can be.

Having grown up in a poor family, Larry left home when he was just eleven years old, since his mother didn't have enough to feed him and his eleven siblings. He worked at odd jobs, and lived on the streets: the corner of 13th and Vine was his turf. After serving in Vietnam, Larry enrolled in a truckdrivers' training school in Cleveland, Ohio. The only white person in the class of one hundred students, his classmates nicknamed him "the Godfather."

One student, James, picked on Larry and called him names. Larry tried to ignore him. But one day, when James jumped in front of him and wouldn't let Larry get in his truck, he lost it. They had a knock-down, drag-out fight. The instructor told them to talk things over and work it out, or they'd both be kicked out of school.

Reluctantly, they did talk. James felt that Larry had usurped the place of a black person more deserving than he. "Everyone knew that white people weren't poor and didn't need any help," Larry remembers James saying. "If white people were poor, it was their own fault and they should get themselves out of trouble. It was white people that kept black people down."

When Larry shared his story, James saw how much they had in common. The only difference really was the color of their skin. After that, the two became friends.

Larry admits that he had grown up resenting blacks, too. While his people had faced the same challenges as minorities, they'd received little or no support. They'd had to fend for themselves. Some had tried going back home, but with no work there, they'd soon returned to the city. In the 1970s, racial tensions deepened when the federal War on Poverty

program forced many Appalachians from their homes, to make way for new public-housing projects for the African-American community.

“It took nothing short of a miracle to help me change my mind about blacks,” Larry says. “But my mentor, Ernie Mynatt, helped me understand who I was, and then who others might be, too.”

Ernie had moved from Harlan County, Kentucky, to Cincinnati in 1959, and started helping Appalachians learn to cope with the big city. He talked with pride about living in the Appalachian Mountains, about the people and their heritage, religion, and education, as well as their hardships and dreams. “The way he talked about our roots, you wanted to be a part of it,” says Larry. “I no longer felt like I had to compete, or make excuses for myself and others.”

Ernie took Larry under his wing and helped him find a home in a residential program for teenage boys. He also taught him about the importance of talking things out. No matter where Ernie was or whom he was with, this big, powerful man always welcomed young people, saying, “Come in. Sit down. Let’s talk.”

By the 1970s, Ernie’s Urban Appalachian Council provided a broad range of social service and cultural programs to the city’s Appalachian citizens. He’s known as “papa to his people” by hundreds of “Ernie’s kids,“ who are now middle-aged, middle-class Cincinnati residents, some of whom become social workers in turn, to serve the next generation in the inner city.

As director of the council’s AmeriCorps program, Larry supervises twenty-seven members from all over the city who work with GED programs and the After-School Homework Clubs. By sharing their life

experiences, they build bridges of understanding. The “Rap Groups” are a big hit—their open, candid style helps people overcome their negative stereotypes. “We need to sit down and talk with each other,” Larry tells the young people he now mentors. “Don’t blame the whole for what a few do. ”

Appalachians have the highest illiteracy and high-school-dropout rates in Cincinnati. The Urban Appalachian Council has been working hard to change this. Their extensive education services include community-based schools and GED programs as well as advocacy and emergency services, and cultural programs like the Appalachian Festival. Allison Raser, the festival’s only paid staff person, is a UAC success story. After dropping out of school at sixteen, she was mentored by Larry, got her GED through the council, and became first a receptionist, then Larry’s secretary.

In 2001, the riots in Cincinnati were national news. For days they threatened to tear the city apart. Larry explains how the riots started with the death of an unarmed black youth. “When he ran from police, then turned and pulled up his baggy pants, the police thought he was going for a gun.” In the wake of this tragedy, the mayor and the community vowed to work together to make things better.

Larry knows how important it is to deal with people’s prejudices and fears. “Blacks are afraid they will get beat up by the police. The police are afraid of getting shot for doing their job,” he says. “And Appalachians are afraid that they won’t get a fair shake.

“One of the great things that came out of this racial strife is the Study Circle Project, sponsored by the Cincinnati Human Relations

Commission," says Larry. "Much like the council, they are training people in small groups of twelve to fourteen how to talk with each other. People from all walks of life, talking along with one policeperson, learn about each other, about their hopes and dreams as well as their fears and ideas for what can be done to make things better for everyone."

These community dialogues give Larry hope. People all over the city are talking, developing a better understanding of one another, and building trust. "Now, when incidents arise, we will be better able to handle them, instead of exploding," Larry says. Passing on Ernie's greatest lesson, he adds, "The only thing that will ever make a difference is helping others to develop positive identities for themselves and then for others," says Larry.

The Urban Appalachian Council carries on Ernie's legacy by helping Appalachian youth build a better future. They are also building bridges. By hiring blacks and whites to work together to improve their communities, the UAC is helping them get past prejudices and get to know each other as people. It's the most integrated nonprofit organization in Cincinnati. "Mixing people together creates a natural curiosity. There is a learning that happens when people share parts of their lives with each other," Larry says. "I wish there were more of us out there."

> *I shall pass through this world but once. Any good that I can do or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.*

Talk with people who are different from yourself. Build bridges between different cultures in your community. Study the Appalachian traditions in our country, and encourage greater support for Appalachian communities to strengthen families, develop community resources, and reform the systems that influence their lives. Contact the Urban Appalachian Council at larryr@one.net or visit www.uacvoice.org.