

# Reconnecting McDOWELL

## Stay connected with McDowell

McDowell County is an American story that deserves a new chapter—one filled with promise, with goodwill, with the type of shared commitment that offers solid reasons to believe in a brighter future. Be a part of this historic partnership and show your support for McDowell’s children and the greater community by joining the effort at [www.ReconnectingMcDowell.org](http://www.ReconnectingMcDowell.org).

● **Make It Shine McDowell for Young Readers**

● **Community Room Opens at Renaissance Village**

● **Veterans Oral History Project**

**‘... REGARDLESS OF WHATEVER PRESSING ISSUE IS AT HAND, THERE MUST BE A SENSE OF HOPE AND INSPIRATION, AND CULTURAL ENRICHMENT IS THE BEST WAY TO PROVIDE THIS.’**

## Cultural Programming Is Bustling in McDowell

Reconnecting McDowell is committed to bringing musical acts to McDowell County and using the Jack Caffrey Arts and Cultural Center as a focal point for these activities. Studies have shown that the arts not only provide inspiration to community residents but also can play an important role in economic development efforts. “Discussions with community leaders in McDowell County inevitably come back to the need for cultural programming in the region,” says Mark Kemp, Reconnecting McDowell’s grants manager. “A common theme is that regardless of whatever pressing issue is at hand, there must be a sense of hope and inspiration, and cultural enrichment is the best way to provide this. The Earth without art is just ‘Eh,’ as the saying goes.”

On July 8, internationally known folk/punk musician J. Marinelli played at the Caffrey and again at 3 Guys Pizza and Brews in Williamson, Mingo County, the next night. As his website states, “The grandson of an Italian immigrant coal miner (and proud-and-loud son of the central Appalachian Mountains), Norway-via-West Virginia punk-



Attendees enjoy the performances of musicians Levi Sanders and Jamie Lester.

folk troubadour J. Marinelli has taken the do-it-yourself idea to its furthest extreme.” After performing in various bands during the 1990s, Marinelli abandoned the notion of a backing band and decided to perform as a one-man band.

On Aug. 19, the McDowell County Commission on Aging hosted a talent show at the Caffrey. Reconnecting McDowell was delighted to serve on the judge’s

panel, as a full house enjoyed a showcase for local talent. Winners of the show will appear at another local showcase in the spring.

On Oct. 21, there were two performances of “Shared Heritage: Stories and Music from Coal Towns in Wales and West Virginia,” the first for 225 fifth-grade students and the second for the general public. The country of Wales and

**See Cultural Programming on Page 5**

ALMOST 12,000 BOOKS GIVEN TO STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

## Reading Opens the World: 40,000 Books for Young Readers



Reconnecting McDowell staff distributed books at a Southside K-8 back-to-school event.

We have already given away almost 12,000 of the 40,000 books that were donated by the American Federation of Teachers' Reading Opens the World initiative. Thus far, books have been given away at summer camps and reading programs, back-to-school events, kindergarten clubs, porch/home visits by school personnel, community baby showers and partner events, and they have supplemented both public and school libraries. Books were also distributed at the Pre-K Pumpkin Patch and school-site Trunk or Treats.

## The Randi Weingarten Community Room at Renaissance Village

When Reconnecting McDowell was constructing Renaissance Village, the multiuse housing project in Welch, there was unwavering support for the idea of having a community gathering space in the building. At the facility's ribbon-cutting in June 2022, the Randi Weingarten Community Room was dedicated. It is named after American Federation of Teachers President Weingarten, who also serves as president of the Reconnecting McDowell board and without whom the housing project would never have existed. The room has hosted several events this year, including two watershed training sessions, a meeting for West Virginia University President E. Gordon Gee and community leaders, and a Halloween party for area 4-H youth.



Young people enjoy the Halloween party organized by 4-H in the Randi Weingarten Community Room.

**'WE LIVE IN A BEAUTIFUL PART OF THE WORLD AND ARE PROUD TO BE PART OF THIS EFFORT.'**

## Make It Shine McDowell Litter Cleanup

Make It Shine McDowell—a coalition founded by Reconnecting McDowell and the McDowell County Convention and Visitors Bureau and featuring members from church groups, volunteer fire departments, labor, other nonprofits, state agencies and committed citizens—set up two recent countywide litter cleanups. The fall event, held on Sept. 17, was another successful day for the project.

**'We have been coming to McDowell County for 27 years to do this annual Elkhorn Creek cleanup, and it has never looked better here. The efforts of Make It Shine McDowell, McDowell County Solid Waste Authority, Reconnecting McDowell and others is absolutely making a difference.'**

—Steven Pugh,  
Trout Unlimited,  
Southern West Virginia  
Chapter President

With a grant from the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, two more organizations joined the partnership—the Southern West Virginia Chapter of Trout Unlimited and the McDowell County Solid Waste Authority (MCSWA)—with Trout Unlimited focusing on cleaning up a stretch of Elkhorn Creek and MCSWA making dumpsters available at several locations in the eastern part of the County. Make It Shine collected 137 large bags of trash along US 52, Trout Unlimited netted 47 bags from the stream, and about 40 tons of larger items were brought to the dumpsters. When combined with the spring Make It Shine event, the total for 2022 was more than 90 tons of large items removed and nearly 600 bags of litter taken to the landfill.

"We have been coming to McDowell County for 27 years to do this annual Elkhorn Creek cleanup," says Steven Pugh, president of the Southern West Virginia Chapter of Trout Unlimited, "and it has never looked better here. The efforts of Make It Shine McDowell, McDowell County Solid Waste Authority, Reconnecting McDowell and others is absolutely making a difference. We live in a beautiful part of the world and are proud to be part of this effort."

The next cleanup will be held in April 2023.

'WE ARE ALSO FORTUNATE TO HAVE STRONG PARTNERS ... TO MOVE US FORWARD.'

## Friends of the Tug Fork River



FotTFR works arduously to remove old tires from the river.

As a founding partner with the Friends of the Tug Fork River (FotTFR), Reconnecting McDowell has continued to be involved as the organization grows and evolves.

In early October, FotTFR, with support from the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, completed another year of getting old tires out of the river. With projects in Kermit, Warfield and Matewan, workers were able to retrieve an additional 3,675 tires, bringing the four-year total to more than 8,700 tires removed. In

November, FotTFR was approved for a Stream Partners grant to cover certain administrative costs, continue water sampling efforts and conduct a study for public access points in Mingo and McDowell counties.

"We have a number of projects on the drawing board, including developing more access areas for anglers and boaters up and down the river," says Pete Runyon, president of FotTFR. "And we have an active group on our board of directors helping turn ideas into reality. We are also fortunate to have strong

partners—key among them is Reconnecting McDowell—to move us forward."

The Friends of the Tug Fork River Facebook page has grown to more than 17,000 members. You can join the group at <https://bit.ly/tugriver>.



## Cultural Programming: ‘The Earth without art is just ‘Eh’ ...’

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the state of West Virginia share many commonalities, with a legacy of coal mining at the top of the list. These shows explored storytelling and musical traditions born in the coal communities found in both places and featured five highly regarded performers, including Peter Stevenson from Wales, West Virginia storytellers Jo Ann Dadisman and Judi Tarowsky, and musicians Levi Sanders and Jamie Lester. This event received funding from the National Coal Heritage Area Authority, and transportation for students was provided by the McDowell County school system.

**‘Affrilachian hip hop represents the youth in Appalachia who feel like they are not heard, who feel like the age gap and old traditions are holding us back; it’s for those who love their homes but struggle to find an identity in their state.’**

—Eric Jordan (DJ Monstalung)

On Oct. 22, the Caffrey was the location for Hip Hop from the Hills: An Affrilachian Showcase. The artists featured—Eric Jordan (DJ Monstalung), Cortez Hairston (DJ Strizy), Jumbo Green (aka 6’6” 240) and rising star Wvlf—are professional performers based in Morgantown. While they call West Virginia home, their experiences have taken them far beyond, sharing stages with hip hop legends such as Bubba Sparxxx, Chuck D, a Tribe Called Quest and Lil Wayne, and performing for



audiences as far afield as London.

Jordan is considered the founder of West Virginia hip hop, and his commitment to the art form—not only for the cultural and musical aspects, but as a way to empower often-neglected youth in often-forgotten places—is unwavering. “Affrilachian hip hop represents the youth in Appalachia who feel like they are not heard, who feel like the age gap and old traditions are

The artists and bands for Hip Hop from the Hills: An Affrilachian Showcase pose with Reconnecting McDowell staff member Mark Kemp.

holding us back; it’s for those who love their homes but struggle to find an identity in their state,” he says. Hairston is originally from Gary in McDowell County.

Plans are underway for a series of shows in 2023.



PRESERVING IMPORTANT HISTORIES FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

# Veterans Oral History Project

As this newsletter went to press, Reconnecting McDowell received word that the National Coal Heritage Area Authority has approved funding for “Stories of McDowell County WV Veterans: An Oral History.” Based on internal calculations and anecdotal information, we estimate that there are fewer than three World War II veterans alive in the County. As time takes its toll and we lose more and more veterans every year, there is a pressing need to capture their experiences.

The project brings together an enthusiastic team of McDowell County students to perform the interviews and the multimedia talents of Renee Bolden, project coordinator, to present the stories in various formats. This

effort will preserve important histories for future generations, while at the same time honoring those who have served our country.

“There are few—if any—places where veterans are more revered than McDowell County,” says Reconnecting McDowell’s Mark Kemp, grant administrator for the project. “Welch, the county seat, is home to the longest-running Veterans Day parade in the country (104 consecutive years in 2022). Welch also honors individuals who have served with banners on light poles around downtown; the World War I Memorial in Kimball is the only such place in the U.S. honoring African American soldiers; and Boy Scouts place flags on veterans’ graves each year.”



One of many banners in Welch that celebrate U.S. veterans.

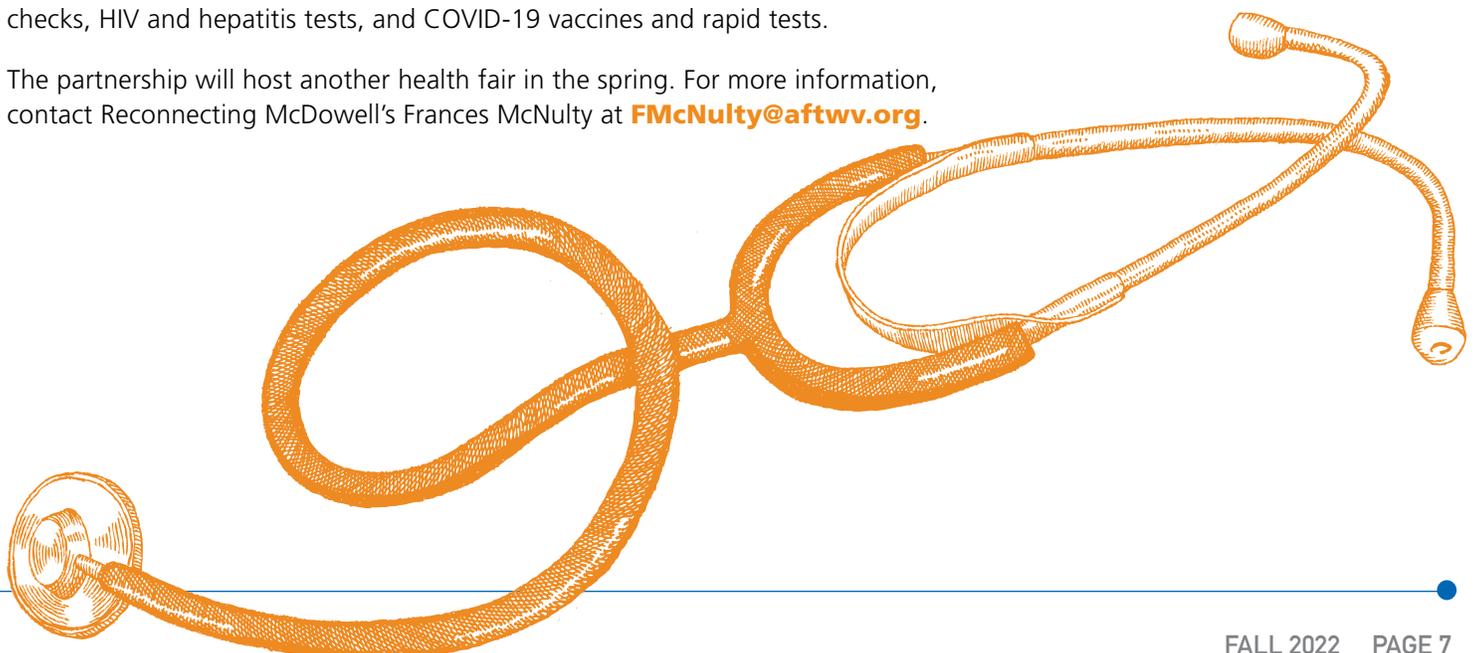
On the previous page, Welch Mayor Harold McBride partakes in the long-running Veterans Day parade.

THIRD EVENT FOR 2022

# Health Fair in Welch

The Making Health Happen fair was held on Oct. 28 at the Armory in Welch. It was the third health fair for 2022 that was organized by Reconnecting McDowell, South Central Educational Development, Unicare, MountainHeart and McDowell County FACES. Participants received free eye exams, glucose screenings and A1C testing, blood pressure checks, HIV and hepatitis tests, and COVID-19 vaccines and rapid tests.

The partnership will host another health fair in the spring. For more information, contact Reconnecting McDowell’s Frances McNulty at [FMcNulty@aftwv.org](mailto:FMcNulty@aftwv.org).



# Let's Connect

Follow Reconnecting McDowell on social media to receive the latest updates and news. We share information on webinars, job-training opportunities and upcoming community events. We also highlight our partners and their work in McDowell County and the state.

## Social Media



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## Want to get involved or learn more?

For more information about Reconnecting McDowell or to find out how you can get involved, contact Debra Elmore ([delmore@aftwv.org](mailto:delmore@aftwv.org) or 304-552-5766).