

BC welcomes author, educator, and researcher

Deborah Hicks

Alumnus speaks on using literature, education, and digital story-telling to reach impoverished Appalachian community

By Kara Fohner
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On Friday, Oct. 3, BC Alumnus Dr. Deborah Hicks was inducted into Brevard College's Gallery of Distinguished Alumni. Following the ceremony, Hicks spoke to students, faculty, and fellow alumni in Scott Commons about the work she is doing as a part of her position as a research scholar at Duke University. In 1998, Hicks earned a Doctorate in Education and Human Development from Harvard University. She is now executive director and founder of PAGE, the Partnership of Appalachian Girls' Education.

Originally from Rosman, NC, Hicks is familiar with the challenges that face Appalachian students. She was 17-years-old when she arrived at Brevard College. "I was a working class girl. I very naive. I knew nothing about college, nothing about how to get ahead, how to climb the ladder, anything like that," said Hicks. "Coming here really opened a door of opportunity for me. It opened my eyes to the world of books and learning and just asking questions, and I liked it so much that I just kept on going. I came out with the title of researcher in education, and ended up getting a couple of university teaching jobs."

Hicks taught at the University of Cincinnati, which is located close to the Kentucky Border, from 1998-2009. There, she discovered what is now commonly referred to as Urban Appalachians, remnant of a population shift from the South to the North that occurred during the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. "Over 3 million of them moved from places like Kentucky and West Virginia to look for meaningful jobs in cities like Dayton, Akron, Chicago, and Cincinnati," Hicks said. "When I discovered this significant Appalachian community in Cincinnati, I really wanted to teach. I wanted to roll up my sleeves and go into the classroom."

After locating a school in one of the most impoverished Urban Appalachian communities, Hicks says that she approached administration and volunteered her services as a literacy teacher. There, she formed a relationship with a group of young girls in one second grade classroom. Midway through their third-grade year, she asked them whether they would like to have a class of their own, where they would read books and discuss topics that were meaningful to them as girls. "We met every week and over the summer for four years," Hicks said. "It really was, for me and for this group of seven girls, a kind of coming

together, a kind of sisterhood."

Hicks led her small band of girls in the reading of literature, which they connected to their lives through critical discussion. As time progressed, they established a space where the girls could tell their own stories.

"It taught me about what education can do in terms of critical thought, critical thinking, and critical expression," she said. "Their lives were very complicated." One student, Claire, an avid reader at age 10, had lost her mother, "not to death, but to the streets," as Cincinnati, like many Appalachian communities, had a severe prescription drug problem.

"It wasn't just the kind of usual thing that educators say nowadays. It was deeper than just skills alone. It was really creating an opportunity for girls to think about themselves in ways they would never have imagined and to imagine worlds they never would have imagined."

Hicks returned to NC when her group of girls entered sixth grade. She had realized in the wake of her experience in Cincinnati that she wanted to create a nonprofit to help young girls from rural communities improve their literacy, critical thinking, and leadership skills.

"I did something brazen and probably very ill-advised," she said. "I quit my job."

Then, she drove up and down the mountains, searching for the economically distressed communities that are secreted in the valleys and off the twisting backroads in Appalachia. She decided to begin in Madison County, where she says that you still find severe poverty in working class populations who are living on the fringe, outside of the economy. "They're coming from traditional farming families," Hicks said. "Now their sources of livelihood and work have dropped out, including the tobacco farming industry and culture. Many have been left behind."

PAGE was founded, after a significant amount of research, in partnership with Madison County Public Schools and Duke University, and in 2010, PAGE established an intensive summer program for nine young girls who came, some by bus, from the communities of Spring Creek, Hot Springs, and Laurel.

"Every summer now, I bring a group of very hardworking, very impassioned Duke undergraduates with me. They come out into the mountains to Madison County and they live for about nine weeks," Hicks said.



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These students work to mentor the nine girls in literature, technology, critical thought, leadership, and more recently, digital storytelling. The girls in PAGE begin the program during the summer before sixth grade and return every summer up until ninth.

"We're trying to engage and capture their attachment to school and to learning during those critical years of middle school," she said. "For the PAGE girls, they would be the first in their family to finish high school," Hicks added, noting that, in that area of Madison County, attendance of the rural students in the public high schools is at about 50 percent.

PAGE works with the Appalachian Regional Partnership (ARC) to invite every eligible girl into the program. The ARC designates economically distressed areas, and Hicks hopes to be able to reach out to every girl who is in need. PAGE is in the process of applying for 50123 nonprofit status, and may eventually be formatted to run year-around.

"Through teaching the girls in Madison County, we're trying to achieve something that some people call 'the girl effect,' said Hicks. "If you invest in the education of adolescent girls, you have an impact on the whole community, because they grow up, they get an education, and then their children are educated, and then you start seeing wider change in the community."

Hicks' most recent book, "The Road Out: A Teacher's Odyssey in Poor America," may still be available at the BC Bookstore.