



Like Walking Onto Another Planet

Stories About the TRUE Impacts of
Mountaintop Removal Mining

Introduction

Oscar Romero of El Salvador is often called the *voice of the voiceless*. He felt compelled, no matter what the consequences, to be a spokesman for those whose oppression denied them the capacity to speak and be heard. In my 20 years of ministry in my native Appalachia, I have encountered a somewhat different situation.

The people with whom I walk are not voiceless. They speak with eloquence, grace and an unusual clarity. Their words, their stories have a power all their own, reflecting the wisdom gained through years of struggle. They do not need my voice. If anything, they need only a vehicle by which to send their stories to a larger audience of those who have not heard them. This booklet hopes to serve as such a vehicle.

The stories were collected through a series of audio-taped interviews with individuals from the southern coalfields of West Virginia. They have been transcribed as faithfully as possible, keeping them in the narrative form and speech of the people. I have made changes only to clarify references or to keep my own questions and responses out of the mix.

These are *their* stories. This is the truth as *they* see it.

Carol Warren

About the Artist

The illustrations in *Like Walking Onto Another Planet* were done by Joel Futrell of Ergonomically Incorrect Designs. Joel lives in Davis, Calif., with his wife and daughter. He says:

“I grew up on a farm in western Kentucky, very

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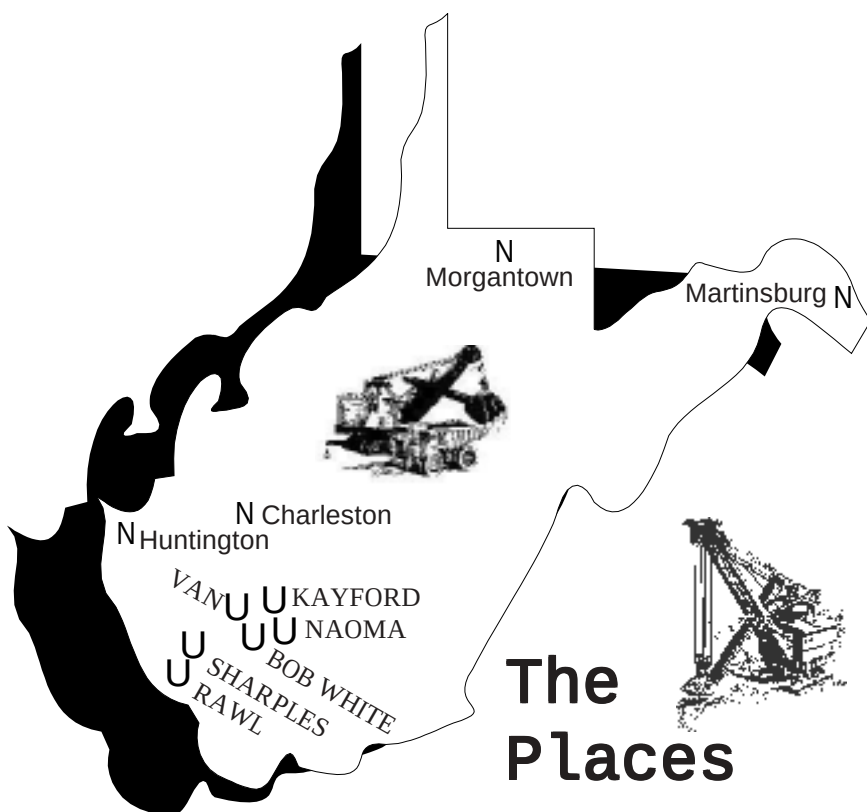
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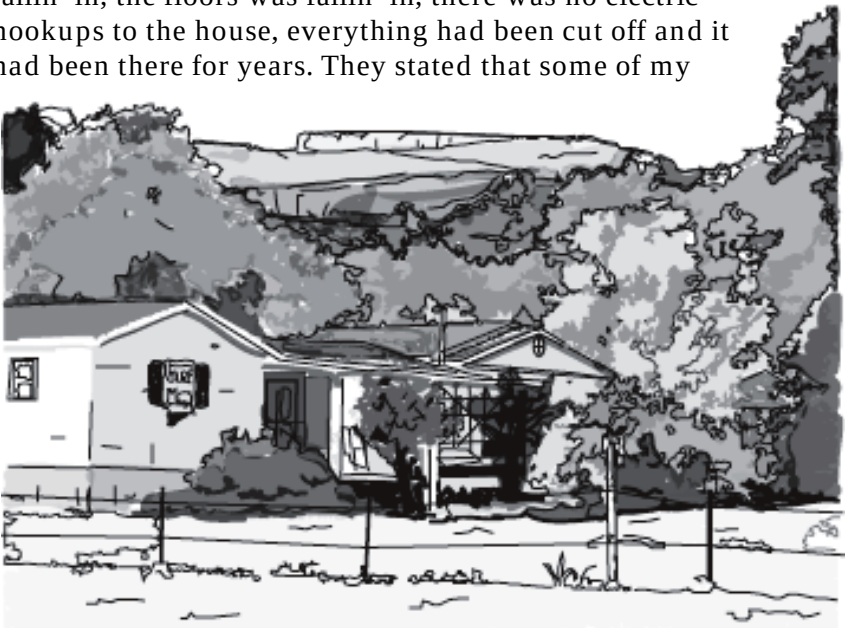
My name is Cynthia Karriker. I was born here in the Boone County area and I left here after I graduated high school. I stayed away from here for 10 years. I lived down south and worked. I decided to move back here in 2000, and I moved into a home that my grandmother had purchased at public auction in the community of Sharples.

When I first started remodeling the house there we had children playin' in the streets. They'd ride their bikes and play basketball. We had neighbors. I mean it was a community – a pretty tight-knit community because most of the residents had been there or raised there all their life.

About last year, I would say, it really started. The [coal company] started having these big meetings at the ambulance center tellin' us about how they were gonna not affect our community when they brought the mining operation in, and how they were gonna put us on a different water company, and how none of our homes would be affected by this.

The first thing that really started it for me to see the chain of events take place was when the house next door to me – which was vacant and empty, and had been for years – burnt down to the ground mysteriously.

No one knew how the fire started. I mean, the roof was fallin' in, the floors was fallin' in, there was no electric hookups to the house, everything had been cut off and it had been there for years. They stated that some of my



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neighbors had seen a white Jeep Cherokee with a miner – well, whoever was in it had miner stripes on – tellin’ some of ‘em that had come out the door (this was at five o’clock in the mornin’) to call the fire department. The fire department’s right at the end of my street, so it shouldn’t have been a big deal for them to come down the street to put the fire out.

Except – they cut the water off for four days, because they were flushin’ out our tanks ‘cause all our water in the community was *brown*, and we were all complainin’ about the brown water. So while the water was cut off, a fire started. And I really kind of got the gist of how things were goin’ when the fire department didn’t try to put the house out – they just kinda contained it and let it burn to the ground, more or less.

Because they had the water off, I had to take a five gallon bucket out to the creek. When one of the walls fell against my fence line, it caught my fence on fire. And there was leaves on the ground - the fire was crawlin’ across into my yard. And the fire department was not stayin’ there monitorin’ it. They would come up, spray a little bit of water on it and then they’d leave and go back down there and set on their rump. So I had to make about three trips to the creek to douse down the fence line to keep the fire from comin’ over into my yard.

I thought that was kind of odd and strange. Because even if I had owned, or had through inheritance got an old house like that, and had that property there, if it caught on fire I would still want the fire department to put it out so that if anything in there could have been salvaged, it would have been. They didn’t seem concerned with puttin’ the structure out. They just wanted to see it burn to the ground and keep it, I guess, from burnin’ my house down because I was voicin’ my opinion about it. “Hey, you need to spray some water on here. I can feel the heat through my window.”

So after that happened, they started buyin’ some more of our neighbors out. And the empty houses...they were tellin’ everybody their workers were gonna come and live in the empty houses. So we thought, well, they’re buyin’ these houses, they’re gonna put their workers in these houses. That’s what they were tellin’ us.

But these houses started getting’ stripped of everything! People were goin’ inside takin’ the cabinets out, they were takin’ the carpet up, the ceiling tiles out, the siding off the outside of it,

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the windows, doors off of the houses.

And the residents of us that were left there, that had not sold out to the company, were just in awe. We had no idea what was goin' on. The company made no effort to just come and say, "Hey, we're lettin' people come in here and buy these things out of these houses." It was just like a free-for-all – it was like a riot! I mean, people just comin' and takin' whatever they wanted, you know? I lost a air conditioner in all that because they just decided to take it out of my bedroom window!

I had called the State Police numerous times reportin' these people comin' in and out, and givin' their tag numbers and everything, sayin', "Hey, you need to check out why these people are in here, why they're tearin' this stuff out of these houses." It really brought the criminal element into our community.

For those of us who were left there, we had to deal with it. The company had no security in the area at the time, no security guards posted or anything. They were just lettin' it run rampant in our area.

Basically, they finally come around to bringin' their crews in to demolish the homes and reclaim the lots that they had bought. So they came in and they done that, which helped as far as keepin' the criminal element out 'cause they no longer had anything else to steal. But it totally destroyed our community. The kids that played in the streets were gone. Their families had moved into other homes and out of the area. Neighbors that I had known for five years were no longer there. They moved to other counties.

To be honest, I'm surprised we still have a Post Office open, because they surely could not have that many boxes to fill.

Back in the '70s there had been 400 and some people in that area, livin'. You would probably not even come close to 40 now. You drive up through there now and it doesn't look anything like it did. They've put impoundment ponds on the left side of the road, they've moved the road, they've moved the streams, they've put in a big bridge. As close as those ponds are to the stream, I just can't see if somethin' happened, the water would not go in our stream. That's the first place it *would* go.

I live right on the creek bank. When the water gets high it comes up in my yard. Like back in '03, we had some really bad rains. The water was eight foot from the foundation of my house.

The next day in the paper there was an article talkin'

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about how there was a 12 foot wall of water comin' down through, past my house, that was comin' from these ponds up above me. They were feedin' the creek like it had overflowed and so that's why we had so much water.

But when it was investigated, it was deemed an "act of God." We're left to believe this is just an act of nature – nothin' they're doin' is affectin' how the water is comin' down on us. And I fully expect that we will have another horrible disaster before anyone in the Executive Branch of our government finally has to turn around and look us in the face and tell us why they're lettin' us be washed off the planet.

We don't have the kind of game in our forests that we had. And our plants. We had people that lived on roots – that's what they did, they dug roots and they sold 'em for a livin'. These people can't survive like that any more. The roots are gone. All the natural things, the trees, the plants, the ginseng... this area was just eat up with nature years ago back when I was in high school. You never seen anything like what you're lookin' at now. And that was only back in '89.

Cazy Mountain itself, I had a picture of what the top of it looked like. It was pristine. It had trees, it was a dirt road. There was leaves everywhere, there was plants everywhere. And now you go up and there is nothing but huge humps of dirt covered with grass. And that's all there is. You don't see deer runnin' through there now. You don't see the bears, and the nature, the wildlife, you used to see when you crossed that mountain.

And that's a county road. Our own county won't even keep that road up. You travel across that road in a car and you pretty much can tear your car up, just because it gets rutted out so bad. The coal company is left to keep it scraped and maintained, but they won't even do that. Every time it rains, it eats the road out again.

It's like our elected officials in our area don't *care* if we have our roads to drive on. They don't care if we can take our kids out in the mountains and hunt where great-grandpa took their parents huntin'. Those traditions are all bein' killed. Our lives are bein' killed. Our communities are bein' disintegrated. It's fallin' down right around us, right before our very eyes. You can look out my back door and you can see dozers and all different kinds of equipment goin' down the back strip there, gettin' ready to put the train tracks in for the load out.

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It's like our community is situated right smack dab in the middle of a coal mine. It wasn't like that before. They moved in on us – we didn't move in on them.

I've tried to rally support from the local citizens, and my neighbors and things, and people just don't seem like they get it. Like until water washes through their livin' room - maybe then they'll get it. Until you can get other people to join up with you and say we're tired of this, they're just gonna run right over you.

Corporate greed is takin' over the world, and it's just really prevalent in our area. We are standin' right in the way of billions of dollars worth of coal. What is a family of three's lives gonna matter compared to billions of dollars? They're not gonna care.

I think it will eventually come down to some really bad things happenin'. I think it will be comparable to a Mine War or a march or somethin.' If they keep pushin' the citizens back into a corner, eventually they're gonna come out of there on 'em. Just exactly like if you were fightin' somebody and backed 'em in a corner, eventually they're gonna come out of there on you and defend theirself.

And that's what we're tryin' to do, defend ourself. It's not gonna be easy and we might not win, but we just have to try to do it.

It was intimidating for me to have the house next door catch on fire, because it made me realize how easy it would be for them to be rid of me just like that - if it was what they wanted to do. If they wanted to burn my house to the ground and I wouldn't have anywhere to live, they're not gonna care. All they're gonna try to do is to buy the lot off my grandmother as fast as they can.

They're not gonna try to say, "Oh, we're sorry this happened. Let us help you out to get you another home." They're not gonna do that. They don't care if they're puttin' people out on the street. Their greed just takes over everything. It consumes them – it's all consuming.

I don't think my daughter will choose to live here. If she did, she'd probably move to the northern part of the state, 'cause there's not gonna be anything left for anybody to live on here.

If things continue like they are, there's not gonna be anything left. If you go on top of some of these strip sites and you stick a shovel in the ground, the only thing you're gonna pull up

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outta there is sand and rock. What they're reclaimin' these sites with is only plants and tree matter that will grow in that type of soil. There is no topsoil. There is no black dirt for our native plants to grow in any longer. They have been wiped out. And once they're all gone, you're not gonna bring it back. It's gonna be as if an animal went extinct.

And they're really tryin' to make all of us extinct. That's the way I feel about it. They really are. And it's sad. It's sad that our political leaders let 'em do whatever they want.

Obviously, they must be paddin' their pockets, they're getting' somethin' out of the decisions they're makin' on our behalf. We're electin' 'em in there, but they obviously aren't keepin' up their end of the bargain. And I think that's another problem with what's goin' on here. We need people to run for office who have some of the genuine qualities of people in the past who were really in office for the people.

It's hard to find those people any more who care about the workin' man and the family, and havin' an economy for the state so that everyone can grow and everyone can benefit, not just the rich man or the corporate owner. We need someone in office who's gonna take care of us and preserve our land for us and our children and our great-grandchildren.

We've been here hundreds of years, our family has. James Workman was one of my progenitors that fought the Indians. Right up at Jasper Workman Branch is where he lived, and his family. Our history can go back so far in this area. It's just pitiful that all that is goin' to be destroyed.

What are you gonna show to a future generation? "Oh look, this is the flattened place where your great-great-grandpa had his farm. It don't look nothin' now like it did back then" – if you could even *find* it to begin with, to show it to 'em. Everything, once they do this, it looks completely different from what it did. It's like walkin' onto a different planet.

I lived away from here for 10 years and I never dreamed in a million years I would come back here and see it like this. When I moved back here, it was just like an evolution. And it's evolved to a pace here now where they're tearin' things up so quickly. It's mind-boggling to see how fast they can destroy so much! And they don't even have to put it back the way it was. They just throw a little grass seed on there and say it'll be all right.

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Where's the trees you took out? Where's the trees that was holdin' the soil there that used to be there? That's why the water's comin' down on us, and comin' down on us hard, there's nothin' to hold the dirt to the ground.

That's the federal government, though, for you. They're the ones that could mandate that the DEP or whoever would have to go in there on the mines and replace native trees – not Russian autumn olive or whatever's gonna grow on the sand. We wanna see some oaks and birch, and what's in our mountains already is what needs to be put back there.

I just think the intimidation aspect will probably get much worse. Because I do not make a secret of how I feel. I have "Friends of Mountains" signs in my front window, I put brochures up in my front window. I'm turnin' the front window of my house into a bulletin board for everyone to have to look at when they drive by.

If no one else in that community is gonna be the reminder, I will remind them every time they drive by that *I* don't like what's goin' on. And I will speak my mind. I am afraid to a degree, everyone deep down is. But sometimes you have to set fear aside to accomplish a bigger goal, and I'm willin' to do that.

Right now I'm in college. I'm tryin' to get a degree so that I can go into a different type of work, because there's no jobs in this area for me. I have 10 years' worth of experience managin' employees and workin' in an office. And I have been very versatile in my employment experience. I've worked in different kinds of things – I've worked for doctors, I've worked for accountants, I've worked for car dealerships, I've worked for big huge truck dealerships. I have a wide range of diversity in my resume.

But in the economic situation I'm in, in my immediate area, I can't find a job. I've been unemployed for four years now.

I've had to go back to college and pick a profession I might stand a chance at *in this area*. I've had to tailor what I wanted to do with my life to my economic situation, as opposed to doin' what I would really like to do and be able to do in this area.

So they're not just controllin' our land and our streams and our wildlife, in a sense they're controllin' our very lives and the decisions we have to make to survive in this area. If we want to stay, we have to conform to the economic situation *they* have

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made for us.

And I just think that's in violation of every civil right probably anybody ever had. Because freedom to me means you have the freedom to decide for yourself. And by livin' here you do not have that freedom! You have to decide and conform to what's laid out there for you.

And the sooner our political leaders realize they're gonna have an uprisin' against them sooner or later...I mean history repeats itself. And I hate to say it, but I'll be right in the revolution. I'm gonna be a fighter - I'm not gonna wimp out. That's not the way I was raised. I come from a long line of Irishmen. And they're pretty attached to the hills! 🌐

My Life Is On The Line

My name's Maria Gunnoe. I'm from Bob White on Route 85 in Boone County, West Virginia, and mountain top removal moved into my backyard in 2000. Since then, I've lost two access bridges, the use of my water, about five acres of land.

There's 13 landslides between me and the toe of the landfill behind me. Each time it rains these landslides move. All depending on how much rain we get, sometimes they can move as much as five feet in one day. You know that eventually they're gonna wash out, and when they do, I will have another major washout there at my home.

Since 2000, I've been flooded seven times. One time I was flooded with no rain...blue skies and just barely any clouds at all in the sky...and the stream coming through my property just came up. It came up about three feet. By the time I called the DEP [WV Department of Environmental Protection] and made the proper complaints and reports, the water had subsided. The DEP said there was no evidence of what had happened and therefore it was OK.

And with that, I'm gonna add that the DEP doesn't allow citizens to take samples of the water that runs by their house. So I mean if I had run out there and got a sample, it would have been nothing more than my sample. The DEP is not there for the citizens, they're there for the coal companies, and they enable the coal companies. In some cases they even lie to the citizens in order to continue the work on the mountaintop removal site. I've been lied to many times. I've had five DEP agents stand and look at me and tell me an eroded mountain wasn't eroded. I have pictures and a lot of proof showing that it's eroded. It's like they were programmed to say – no matter what I said – that it was not eroded.

They just will not admit the fact that the mountains behind me is crumbling in on my home. The mountains are slipping into the hollow and in turn, it's washing by me, and [it's] flooding the people across from me. Everyone downstream from where that mountaintop removal site is gets flooded and their wells are contaminated. My well is contaminated. Can't drink my water. I buy on average about \$250 worth of water a month, and that's on a slow month. The WV American Water Company's wantin' \$31,000 to put water in to me. And that's only 500 feet worth of water line. They want \$31,000 for that. I can't afford that, of course.

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And the financial aspects of what these catastrophic floods has done to our lives is just unbelievable. Lookin' back on it, myself and my husband had real good jobs, workin' full time, doin' the life thing – you know, livin' life. And then this flood thing started and we was just bein' completely wiped out.

And in response to all the floods, and to the coal company's claims that this was an "act of God" takin' place in my back yard, I began organizing other people here in the neighborhood. I got to lookin' around, and it seemed that the people around me was bein' affected or were in line to be affected by this same mountain top removal site. Doing this, I've also educated myself on mountain top removal in the regional area, in the Appalachian region. And I've been workin' consistently for the past five years - locally I've been workin' for seven years - on the issue of mountaintop removal and what it's doin' to our communities.

People around here are swiggin' down contaminated water all day long, every day. The health affects are sometimes long-term. It's usually pancreatic cancer or some kind of liver disease, or kidney stones, gall stones – digestive tract problems. And then, too, people's breathing. The blasting is killin' people – just smotherin' them to death through breathin' all of the dust. The computers and electronics and stuff in my house stay completely packed up with black coal dirt and rock dust together. Why do they expect us to just take this? It's not gonna happen down at the state capital. I mean they're not gonna go up there and blast off the top of a mountain in the background of the Capitol.

Through my organizing, I've met quite a bit of....I guess you could call it opposition. I've had my children get harassed. I've got a 15-year-old boy and an 11-year-old girl. I have a 15-year-old boy that looks like a 30-year-old man - he's very big. He's been harassed by grown men. They call him tree-hugger and just generally say things to him that's not nice. My son just takes it and goes – he's a real trooper.

Before I began doing this, let me say, I did talk to my kids about it. My children don't want to leave where they're at, and that gives us one choice. That gives us the choice of fightin' to stay. And we talked about it. When all this first come up, I really felt it was in our best interest to leave, but we were unable to do so. The property's been devalued so bad that you can't get nothin'

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out of it to move forward with your life. And you can't hardly walk off and leave everything you've got. So that's pretty much the point that we're at now.

And I see this happening throughout the communities in southern West Virginia, and then too in Tennessee and Kentucky. And it's wrong, you know? I mean it's flat-out wrong to do people like this. If you react, the strip miners will cut you short every time. If you lash out and say, "Why are you destroyin' my home?" they'll look at you and say, "Well, I gotta have a job." And they will verbally attack you in front of other people in the convenience store and say things to you that's just completely and totally unnecessary. They will say things to you that really instigate you, and makes you – considering all we go through here day to day – just want to reach out and grab 'em and shake the daylights out of 'em! I wanna say, "How can you do me like this in the name of jobs? How can you do me and my family like this and expect us to sit by and just let you do it?"

One thing about West Virginia people is we're not the kind to give up and walk away. If we was the kind to give up and walk away, we would never have settled this area years and years ago. Because this was a very rough terrain – a very rough life here. But people loved it – people like my great-grandmother, people like my grandfather before me. They loved this land, and tended this land. It's land that wasn't meant to be developed. It's a special land. God put it way up high so they'd leave it alone. I've had people to tell me that God put the coal there for us to mine. I have to disagree with that. He buried it because it's so daggone nasty!

The coal companies like to say that the mountain top land is just useless land, and that's not true. How can they say that? That's insane to me. My family growin' up – my grandfather had mountain corn fields and grew corn up in these mountains. And you know, that's our survival. The mountains are literally our survival. And now as long as you're driving through here on the paved road, you're OK, but if you get off that paved road on one side or the other, you're gonna be stopped. You're not allowed into these mountains any more! How can they tell the mountain people that they're no longer allowed in the mountains? That's not right. They're taking away everything that puts us together as a people. And they're expecting *the wrong people* to sit back and take this.

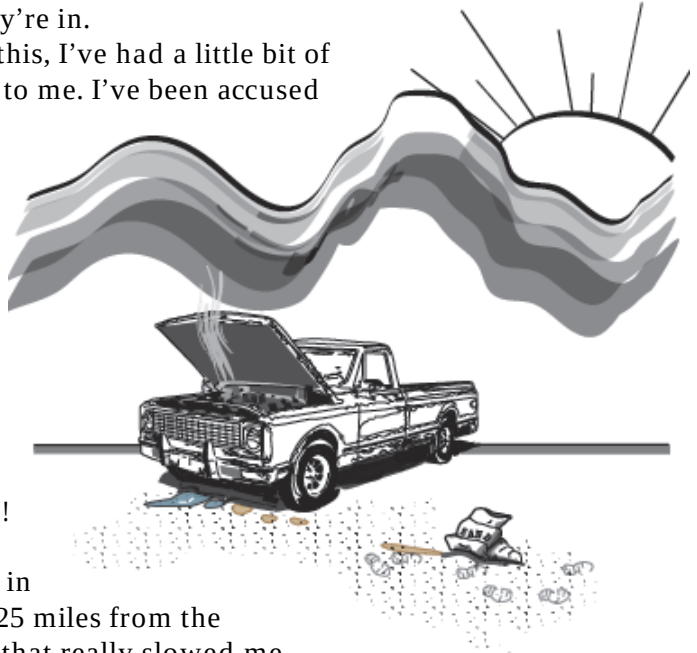
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We're not stupid by no means. There's a lot of very, very intelligent people here that can't read and write, but they're not stupid. They're brilliant in their own sense of the word. They have intelligence that's not taught in college. These people are the people I grew up with – the people I love. And these are people that I won't walk away from. And I would probably stand up to the biggest, strongest, most evil power in the world in order to protect them and to protect their rights to retire in their homes – and to protect their rights to be who they are in the communities they're in.

In doing this, I've had a little bit of everything done to me. I've been accused of all kinds of stuff. I've had sand put in my gas tank - cost \$1,200 to keep my truck on the road. And you know, in this kind of area, if they ground your vehicle, you're grounded! You're stopped right there, dead in your tracks. I'm 25 miles from the nearest town, so that really slowed me

down for quite a while. Teachers in the schools make comments to my kids. It's not their place to tell my children that their water isn't poisoned by coal, when my children know they can't drink their water. I've had my tires cut, my dog shot. People spit on my truck all the time – big, gross tobacco juice spit.

One of my dogs was shot and left in the parkin' lot where my kids catch the school bus. This was my daughter's dog. She actually nursed this dog when he was a baby – he was fed a bottle and was a little spoiled. But this was her dog, it wasn't my dog. My aunt, luckily, worked at the Post Office. She called me and told me that a dog was layin' over there dead, and instead of takin' the kids to the bus stop, I just took them on to school. Then when I came back and confirmed that it was our dog, we were



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just completely devastated. He was a three-year-old baby, really. He was very close to the family. He had veered back onto the mountain top removal site. The last time I seen him, that was the direction he was headed. When they first came in up there, they used to feed my dogs. I kind of feel like they baited him in for the kill.

Then I had a dog shot at the back of my house. It was tied at the back of my house. It's gotten to the point I can't leave my dogs untied because somebody might kill 'em. Well, I had the dog tied at the back of my house and he was shot right in the top of the head. This was within thirty feet of my bedroom window. There's a lot of trains goes by where I live at, so they could've done it while a train was goin' by and I wouldn't have heard it. Had it been a small caliber gun, I wouldn't have heard it. They know that. They know how to get you. By killing off your animals, that opens them a way to get in your place without people knowin' it.

The people in these communities, they feel the blasting, they see the trucks on the road runnin' over top of their family. They see what's going on, but they don't see what it looks like from the sky. Seein' what it looks like from the sky *scares* you. It scares you real bad to come home to it. When it rains here, we all get flooded. And then the coal companies, they care so much! After 5 acres of my land and my life washed down the stream, the coal company engineer came into my front yard and said that this was "an act of God!"

You know, the night when this wall of water was comin' down through the hollow at me, I run to the mountain. But the mountain was slidin' and I couldn't go there. I couldn't get out, the streams had me and my family surrounded. I literally hit my knees, and I prayed for everything I was worth! And there was an act of God took place that night. But not the one they claimed. And that was the same claim they made after they killed 125 people in the Buffalo Creek flood. I lost family in the Buffalo Creek flood. My father was a rescuer in the Buffalo Creek flood. So that incident was very close to our family.

To see what come off that mountain, and to know what it had been like for 37 years, well, it's a big eye-opener to realize what a dramatic difference the mountain top removal makes in everything! I mean, everything around these strip sites is constantly erodin', and there's always water runnin' in all

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different directions. The DEP calls that “streams meandering.” They were never streams before – now they’re streams!

This process it’s tearin’ my property all to pieces, and I have no rights over my property. The only right I have over my property is the right to pay taxes on it! I have no control over what’s goin’ on. The coal company has tore it all to pieces. It looks awful. Our place had always been pretty much hand-manicured. My father and my grandfather before me took very good care of it. We had fruit trees and just an abundance of food-producing plants right there next to where I lived at. Our land has always been tended in a way that it took care of us. Now that’s no longer the case. Our soil’s contaminated. A garden that we’d gardened for all the thirty-seven years that I’ve been there is now covered with coal slurry. You can’t grow food in that.

My yard was completely washed out. My fruit trees are gone. My nut trees are gone. I woke up the next morning and looked at this massive trench in my front yard and just really...it took me three days to absorb it. I went from crying – sobbing – to being *very mad*. This was three years ago, and I’m still mad. And honestly, I’m a little madder than I was then because I realize how many tentacles this evil has. It goes all the way to Washington, D.C. And if I have to go up against it and fight for my home, I’m goin’ against it. It’s even the United States government. And that alone is pretty intimidating. But at the same time, so is that wall of water sittin’ back up on that mountain waitin’ for me.

I don’t think I’ve ever run up against anything that intimidated me that bad. Keeps me up at night. Keeps my kids up at night. And that’s when you know how powerful the intimidation of these waters are. When you get to the point that you ain’t had ten hours of sleep in a week, and it comes time to lay down and go to sleep and it starts rainin’...and you don’t go to sleep...well!

People look at you different ways. There’s a lot of people here who support what I do. But there’s others who drive in here every day for their jobs, and given a choice, they’d run over me in a heartbeat. They’d do anything they could to get rid of me. But I know I’m bein’ effective and I know I’m makin’ a change. And with that change will come the intimidation factors. But it just doesn’t work – there’s nothin’ more intimidating than what they’ve already put me through. So – bring it on.

My Life Is On The Line

I'm settin' there on my porch, which is my favorite place in the whole world, by the way – I'd rather be on my front porch than any other place in the world and I've been to a lot of places. As it stands right now, with the new permits I saw last week, they're gonna blast off the mountain I look at when I look off my front porch. And I get to set and watch that happen, and I'm not supposed to react. Don't react, just set there and take it. They're gonna blast away my horizon, and I'm expected to say, "It's OK. It's for the good of all."

Am I willing to sacrifice myself and my kids, and my family and my health and my home for everybody else? No – I don't owe nobody nothin'. It's all I can do to take care of my family and my place. It was all I could do before I started fightin' mountain top removal. Now that I'm fightin' mountaintop removal, it makes it nearly impossible. But at the same time, *my life is on the line*. My kids' lives are on the line. You don't give up on that and walk away. You don't throw up your hands and say, "Oh, it's OK, you feed me three million tons of blasting material a day. *That's fine*, I don't mind. It's for the betterment of all."

I can't say that there's anything out there that I'm willin' to risk myself and my kids for. Nothin'. No amount of money, no amount of energy, no amount of anything. If it come down to it, we could live up under a rock cliff with what the good Lord above give us. And we could *live* like that, as long as we got clean water, clean air, and a healthy environment. We can take care of ourselves from there. But when they contaminate our water, our air, and our environment we're gonna die no matter what we do. That's it. 🌍

This Land Will Never Be For Sale

My name is Larry Gibson. I really didn't start havin' violence until I surveyed my own land. The land has been in the family for over 220 years and had never been surveyed by anybody in the family except me. So when I did survey the land, I found that it had always been surveyed in behalf of the oil company, a utility company, a coal company – but never in behalf of the people. I started forcin' 'em back on the boundaries where



they was supposed to be and that's when the violence started. And the first few years, I couldn't even get the law to come up there because my land sits in three counties. Then when I got to be friends with [former WV Congressman] Ken Hechler, then and only then did I start gettin' support from the local officials. The police, not the state troopers. But up there, it's in the wilderness, sits by itself. Most times when things happen, ain't nobody can help anyhow. It's done and over with before anybody can even be told about it, much less get ready for it.

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There's people that's angry about what happens. But you got to be not only angry, you gotta be willin' to do somethin', you know? I been fightin' for my place for 18 years now. You can't go into a situation where people are gatherin' for the first time and sayin' "We've had 118 acts of violence," yet they're just now beginnin' to get involved. You can't do that. You gotta tell people somethin' positive - but you can't make it easy and tell them that nothing's gonna happen to them because there's always the potential.

That [coal company] fellow was on TV the other day – he's the one I met with back in '92. And he told me my land was worth a million dollars an acre to the coal company then. And he turns around and offers \$140,000 for it. You know, it was like we didn't know the difference! Even if we wanted to sell, he was talking to us like they were really gonna do us a favor. "We're gonna help y'all out, make a generous offer to you." And he'd just told me it was worth over a million dollars.

Then when he said that, I said, "The land'll never be for sale. You can have my right arm, but you'll never get the land."

So he said, "Well, you know, you're the island and we are the ocean. You set in the middle of 187,000 acres of coal company land. You're the only thing we don't own between here and the Virginia border." I had my family members – seven of us – there for that meeting and it just didn't make no sense.

That man said, "We don't give a damn about the people up the holler. We don't care about anybody, anything. All we want is the coal and that's it." And up to this point, they've proved their point. They don't care about the people.

The most endangered species we have in West Virginia besides our own people that's bein' displaced out of the mountains and the hollers is the deep miners. People say, "Why don't they say somethin'?" Well, who they gonna say it to? The United Mine Workers is no longer a viable union, all they do is take money from people. They don't do anything for the people. Who you gonna go to? Up my holler when I was a boy, we had 25,000 miners. There was nothin' that went out of that holler without the union's control. And if you worked for a scab outfit, you didn't tell anybody. Now there's nothin' that goes out my holler that's not under company control, and if you work for a union you don't tell anybody. I see a day when the violence is gonna come back like it did on the Blair Mountain battle.

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I've been through the experience of bein' shot at a numerous amount of times because of my stand on what I believe in. People say, "Why don't you just sell?" They've offered me seven times the amount of acreage as what I've got for my place. But then the land they offered me – my people never walked on it. It's been turned over. You can't put anything on it, can't grow anything on it.

The other day I was thinkin' about somethin' I could probably do that would give me the same amount in respect of breakin' the law as what the coal company's doin' now. I've been called a terrorist. I've been called an extremist. I've been called a radical. And the very people around me, they've not been typed extremist or radical.

Recently I was told that we should start workin' with the union again. Well, it was a union site on Princess Beverly right beside of me. The violence didn't start toward me heavily until [UMWA President] Cecil Roberts endorsed mountain top removal - that was in 1999 - and made reference to me as an extremist radical. Well, my dad was workin' in the mine when Roberts started as a boy. He knew me all my life, and yet he got on national TV, on the Capitol steps in front of 1,500 miners, in 1999 and made reference to me as an extremist radical from out-of-state!

And so that's when the violence started. That's when it really escalated. I was havin' trouble before, but I didn't really know what I was goin' into. Now recently they tell me that my land is now - since George Bush got into office - worth \$450 million dollars. And they told me six months ago that by time he gets out of office it will be escalated up to \$650 million.

So I tell people that we have the very best President that we've ever had in the history of mankind right now. I'll be in front of a big crowd at a university or a college, or a big church association or somethin' and you could hear a pin hit the carpet because they're gaspin', tryin' to get their breath about what I just said. And what I meant, and when they let me finish what I'm sayin' before they wanna hang me, is the fact that this man has undone every environmental gain we've made over the last 150 years, just in the six years of his office. And in another two years, we'll never live long enough, because we'll have more of them little Georges runnin' around for the next 50, 60 years. The grip that he's gonna have us in, the vice that he's gonna have us in –

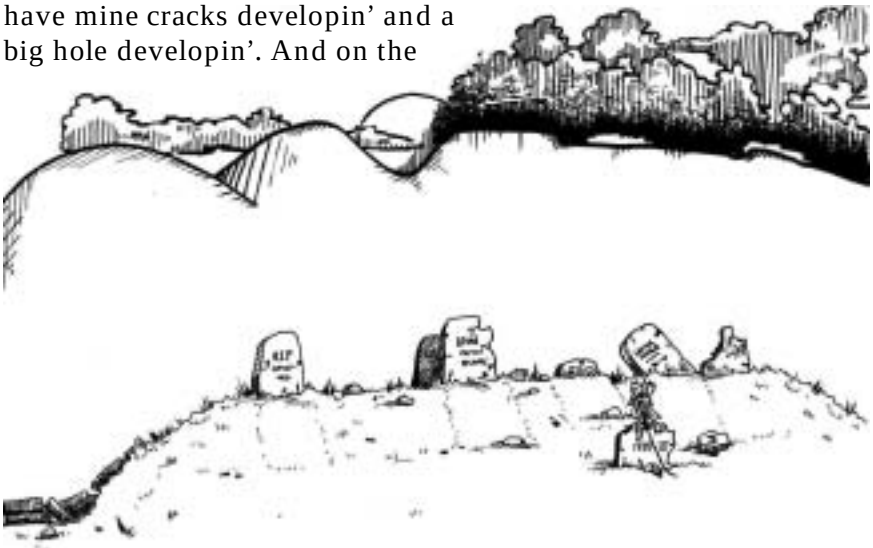
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doesn't really matter whether we're right or not. Like a man told me the other day, we're gonna be *dead right*.

I had some people come to see me this past weekend, and you'll be amazed where they come from and you'll be amazed what they said. They come from Israel. And all the problems they're havin' in Israel right now, with the bombin's and everything – and they turned and looked at me and said they feel sorry for *me*.

We lost about 80, well, close to a hundred headstones in the family cemetery, because every time the coal company would blast, they'd blast debris over into the cemetery. It would bust some of the headstones, turn some of 'em over. Then they'd send a crew of men over to clean 'em up. And then the old sandstone headstones that had carving on 'em, we caught 'em actually throwing them away, destroying them as well. And the simple reason behind that was to prove that we didn't have as many graves there on the ground as we had. And so if they could reclaim some of the gravesites, well, the mountain had 39 seams of coal. There's a lot of wealth underneath there.

But the thing is, that cemetery has been undermined now by nine different companies we have names to, and six others that we don't, over the last 125 years. I'm just doin' this because it's my right to fight for the resting place of my people, but more than likely the people are not even there. And you walk through my cemetery, you can actually see where the underground mine is because the graves are droppin'. We now have mine cracks developin' and a big hole developin'. And on the



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other family cemetery across the ridge we have mine cracks right through the graves that's three and four feet wide, that you can see down in and there's no casket, no body – all that's left is a headstone. And these people that come from Israel, they said, "You mean the coal company doesn't have any respect for the cemetery?" I said, "The coal company don't have respect for the livin', much less the dead."

When I was a kid, our place was like a wonderland. People used to make fun of me and say I was my father's retarded son – they'd call me that, you know? One of the things they couldn't understand was that I was always able to get close to the wild animals. I'd go out in the woods and come home with a bobcat or a squirrel or a coon. One time I was helpin' my dad fix a swing, hang a swing, and I had my bib overalls on. I was settin' there and squirming and bouncin' around. My dad asked in a kind of angry way what I was doin' and a frog started jumpin' out of my pocket.

We never had toys. The only toys we had was in the Spiegel catalog when we went to the bathroom. But it was a wonderland, you know? You could walk through the forest. You could hear the animals. The woods like to talk to you. You could feel a part of Mother Nature. In other words, everywhere you looked there was life. Now you put me on the same ground where I walked, and the only thing you can feel is the vibration of dynamite or heavy machinery. No life, just dust.

How was it when I was a kid? I'll put it to you this way – when they took me to Cleveland, that's the first time that I ever knew I was poor. *They* told me I was poor. Me? I thought I was the richest person in the world. I didn't want for anything. I'd get out in the woods, and on my way, if I was hungry I'd pick my apples. I had a pocket knife I always carried – I'd cut cucumbers up in somebody's garden. Or I'd get chased out of somebody's apple tree. I'd get berries along the way. Pawpaws – I loved pawpaws. And gooseberries.

All these things are no longer there. Now they're forcin' wild boar into my area, and deer into my area, and there wasn't any kind of animal like that when I was a kid. Mostly all small game and an occasional bear. Every other year or so we'd see a bear. Now they're forcin' the bears in on me. A bear needs 50 acres to feed on and now there's nothin' for 'em.

In my childhood, I had a pigeon. I'd come out of my cabin

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and no matter where I went, he was either flyin' over my head or settin' on my shoulder. One time I had a hawk. I named him Fred. For the longest time he was around, then all of a sudden one day he didn't show up. I had a bobcat, and I had a three-legged fox that got caught in a trap. I kept it until it got healed and then it wouldn't leave. I wouldn't trade my childhood for all the fancy fire trucks in the world that the kids had. Nor toys.

It was a hard way, but it didn't seem so hard because it's the only way we knew. What would you walk four or five miles to school for? Because that's the only thing you knew. Now you can't get a kid to go to the front door to catch the bus. I didn't see a TV 'til I was 13. Didn't talk on a phone 'til I was 14. Now when my kids was growin' up, I'd threaten to take the TV off 'em. "How we gonna make it for a whole month without a TV, Dad?" they'd say. That's the problem today - we ain't one with the earth no more.

I don't know what the answer is as far as what's happenin'. Destroyin' all the environment – all the streams. When I was a kid, down at the bottom of the mountain, I could get crawdads, pick 'em up out of the water with my toes. Now nothin' lives in the water. Nothin' lives on the land. What they've done is irreversible. You can't bring it back.

I was just asked this question last week when I was in Tennessee. A lady said, "We've been readin' where you've been fightin' for eighteen years. We'd like to know what keeps you goin'." I just told her I was right. You know, if you're right, you're right. There's no other answer. There's one thing I was taught at a very young age, as a boy livin' in the coalfields. We didn't know the United States President, but we knew the United Mine Workers' President. In other words, we was organized as young people. And that's the way I grew up. Organized. You learn to fight back and you fight back. You have to fight back.

That's the way it was, and that's the way it is for me today. And that's the way I try to reach out to people, to show 'em. There is a sayin' I've lived by all my life, "If you don't stand for somethin', you'll fall for anything." That's not an original statement, somebody else came up with it. But the thing is, it's true.

I came through here four or five months ago tryin' to find some family of mine that was in Cleveland with me when I was a boy. Ain't no sign of anybody that I used to know. And that's the

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way it is all through the coalfields. We've lost 25 percent of the population because of mountain top removal. Remember I said a while ago, we used to have 25,000 miners in my holler. Now we got 500, and they do the work of 25,000. We've lost 130,000 people in my holler.

People need to grab a hold of what they've got, or once the coal company gets through there'll be nothin' left. This ritual of takin' our men to mine for coal – there's not one life worth losin' for coal. As of 1997, we've lost 200,000 men to black lung and cave-ins alike. We lose men every year. And this disaster we just had [at the Sago mine], now people are lookin' at it. Now people are passin' laws. Every time somethin' happens like the Buffalo Creek they pass laws. But then they twist the laws and they still break the laws. Every law that's ever been written has been written in a coal miner's blood.

What I want to say now at the end of this is to encourage people to stand up against oppression and speak for theirself. Because if they're waitin' for the people that's doin' it to 'em to speak for 'em, it's never gonna happen. They're gonna keep takin' and takin' and takin'. Folks have to get in their head that the people that's doin' it to 'em don't care about 'em. They have to care about theirself. They have to take control of their own destiny. Whether it's a coal company or a chemical company or what, they're not gonna do it for the people. The people have to do it for theirself. 

The Ruination of Our State

I'm Jim Foster. I'll soon be 78 years old. I was born at what's called the old Y and O Coal Camp. I grew up here and I've lived here all my life except for a brief time when I was in the United States Marine Corps. I grew up until 17 years old, when I went to work at the coal mines and worked about 10 months. And at the end of that time I went into the Marines. I pulled two years in the Marine Corps and came back and worked in the coal industry then until 1983 when I retired. I retired when I was 55 years old. Three years of that was underground mining - the rest of it was surface. I worked on the preparation plant, work like that.

I've lived in this area all my life, except what time I was in the Marine Corps. I'm the kind of person that has always been proud of my heritage. My father was a coal miner. I had three brothers was coal miners. We worked a total of probably approximately 200 years among us. I feel like the work we done underground coal mining, we needed the coal to produce electricity and stuff that our nation needs. But I believe they could mine it better without destroying the environment like they're doing with mountain top removal.

When I was just a young man, when I first saw coal mining through strip mining – which was a disaster to me – I'll never forget what my dad said. He said, "Son, this is the ruination of our state if they allow this strip mining to go on like that. They can't do that in these mountains and survive." Which he was true, I knew that. But I've said I'm proud my dad didn't live to see this mountain top removal because if he had, he would absolutely... it would have broke his heart. If he knew it today, he would turn over in his grave.

I believe they can mine the coal and do it underground and not do the damage to the environment like they're doin'. The only reason they're doin' it the way they're doin' it with mountain top removal is because they can do it with dynamite and machinery instead of workin' men. They don't want to pay men a decent wage to mine the coal – they want to use mountain top removal.

The way they're destroyin' the mountains here now with this mountain top removal is enough to make anybody cry that can remember what it was like before it was started. When I grew up, just as a young kid, I knew that all the streams here was

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absolutely unbelievable. I could go out anywhere I wanted to and fish any of the streams. Plenty of fish in it, plenty of wildlife, plenty of game to hunt for. I've always been an outdoorsman. My dad started me to huntin' when I was just a young lad, I'd say twelve or thirteen years old, probably. He taught me the safe way to use guns when I went huntin'.

Showed me how to fish, taught me what he could about the proper ways to fish - the way to fish for different types of fish. And at that time, back when I was just a small kid, this stream here, called Little Coal River, was listed as the best bass stream and fishing stream in the state of West Virginia, and that's coverin' a big lot of territory. And it is a fact. I can well remember the fish that was here. Big deep holes of water everywhere you would go! It was unbelievable.

As a matter of fact, right here in the old Y and O Camp where I grew up, there's a big hollow called Roach's Branch. There was thousands of acres of virgin timber in there, never had an axe carried to it. Thousand of acres. And it was absolutely beautiful - you could not believe! Back up in that hollow, there was just a small stream come out of it. There was big holes of water in there that was over my head when I was 13-years-old. You could catch lots of fish even up in there. Fish that was unbelievable!

But since they've started all this strip mining and mountain top removal, all the slides and stuff comin' off the mountains goes right into the river. It's got the river beds all filled up. There's none of those big deep holes left anywhere. The fish is all gone. The only fish we have now is what they usually stock - the state will stock a few trout. And then these coal companies has stocked a few trout, to try to create fellowship among the people. That's the only reason they do it. They don't do it because they want us to have them - I'm sure they don't.

And there was good huntin' - ah, finest huntin' there ever was! Especially grouse huntin'. I loved to grouse hunt when I was a kid. I had an older brother that taught me all the tricks of the trade in grouse huntin'. And I later grew up to be classified as one of the better grouse hunters.

I know that after I came home out of the Marines there was a lot of people would talk about grouse huntin'. They'd all say, "Get with ol' Jim Foster and he'll take you and show you where the grouse is at." And I had a name bein' a good grouse

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hunter, and I really enjoyed the out-of-doors – loved it!

Lots and lots of areas that I can remember when I was just a young man, where we used to hunt and fish – it's all gone. You can't even get in. There's areas that they've already mined out that's completely destroyed. And other areas that you can't get on to hunt because they've got gates. They've got you locked out – you can't go nowhere. And I'd say just give 'em a few more years and the whole thing, it's gonna be completely destroyed. It's on the way out now.

But the way that everything has turned out over the years, when I look back and think about all the good times and everything that's past behind us, it makes me look back...it brings tears to my eyes at times. And anybody that could call back the days when it was like that, I'm sure they would agree with me. At the rate they're goin' now, I'd say in another five or six years from now, practically all this area where we live, it'll be obsolete. There won't be anything left.

There's a friend of mine that's a barber down next to Madison that's at Price Hill, and he was talkin' about he was approached about some property just above his barber shop. Just to let you know what they're doin' to this area through here with strip mining. They wanted to buy that property from him, wanted to put some kind of building in there. He told them he wasn't interested in sellin'. And they told him, "Well, if you don't sell, in five years from now there's not gonna be anything left here, anyway." And I'd say that they was pretty well speakin' the truth when they told him there wouldn't be anything left in five years.

At the rate they're goin' with all the mud slides and the floods and everything they're causin', it would be horrible to imagine what it will be five years from now. Because just in the *past* five years, the changes that's been made is hard for a lot of people to believe. But I believe every bit of it because I've seen it happen. And it's getting' worse each year, and it will keep continuin' to do that until the whole area is completely destroyed. And it's sad – it's really sad to think about.

So far, I haven't been flooded, or anything like that. But about every blast that goes off, we can hear the dishes rattle in the cabinets and feel the whole house shake. And I know it has to be doin' damage, because anybody that'd tell you it doesn't do damage, they're foolish. They don't know what they're talkin' about. It would have to do damage.

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One person can't do anything, but if everybody would open their eyes to the fact of what's happenin' and do somethin', stand up to 'em, they might listen to 'em. But the politicians will wait until the whole area is completely destroyed, have another disaster like Buffalo Creek or somethin'. Then after it happens, they'll come back with some kind of a big deal. These politicians'll get their heads together and say, "We've got to do somethin' about this." They will stop some of the destruction that's goin' on, but what's already happened can't be done away with. It's already a thing that's a disgrace to 'em, but they will make big heroes out of themselves by passin' laws to outlaw stuff like that -after it's gone too far.

But that's the sad part of it. They have to wait 'til a disaster happens to pass laws to try to do somethin' about it. Just like the Sago Mines. Just as soon as it happened, they made up new laws and regulations – got them passed without any problem whatsoever. They was willin' to pass those laws. And they'll do the same thing on this mountain top removal, after they do enough damage to cause a lot of lives to be destroyed. Then they'll come out with some big deal to outlaw it, do somethin' about it real quick, and make heroes out of themselves. But what they ought to do is stop it before it happens. Now that would really be wonderful if they'd do that. But they'll wait until some kind of a big disaster, and they'll close out by passin' laws to outlaw it. And the ones that votes to stop it, they'll make big heroes out of 'em.

Will people's grandchildren live here? That's a long time down the road. You take 25 years from now, I'd say no, there won't be anything left here. Nothin'. Course, I've lived my life. I'm thankful that I got to live in this area at the time and grow up. Because it's hard for people to even imagine what this place was like back when I was a boy.

But those days is gone forever. It'll never be the same – it can't be, because that's all behind us. But I had the privilege of growin' up when we really had somethin' that we could be proud of. And I loved the out-of-doors. That was my main thing, fishin' and huntin'. I enjoyed it more than anything that I done. And I can just thank the good Lord that I had the privilege of livin' in that time slot where we had all that. People livin' today, they've never seen any beauty here in this area. It's all been destroyed – all the beauty's been destroyed. But give 'em another five or six

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years, there won't be anything left. It's sad to think about, but that's just one of the things that I guess the big politicians, the big money people want. They just want to destroy the whole thing before they quit. And they will, they'll destroy it all.

I don't care who they are, what they are. Even the President of the United States, I'll stand up to him and tell him it's wrong. I don't care what he says or anybody else says, it's completely wrong. They can mine this coal a better way, and give a lot more men work. There'd be lots more men employed mining coal, deep mine it, than it would to be destroying the environment like they're doin'. And they will eventually, on down the road somewhere, see and realize what they've done and be ashamed of what they've allowed to happen to our state.

And right now, mountain top removal, the way they're minin' this coal, they will take dynamite and machinery and go in and they'll mine the top of that mountain off. And they have such heavy blasting that it damages all the coal seams down below. If they try to mine that later, the coal is all broke and makes the mine so dangerous as to make it almost impossible to mine that coal. That's all lost. And I mean that's millions of tons of coal that's lost like that because of the way they're mining that coal with mountain top removal. It just makes it unsafe to try to mine it later after they get through.

Probably after I'm dead and gone they'll pass on new laws that will outlaw this. I just wish they had done it sooner so that some of the generations that's comin' on ahead of me could have a better place to live. 🌍

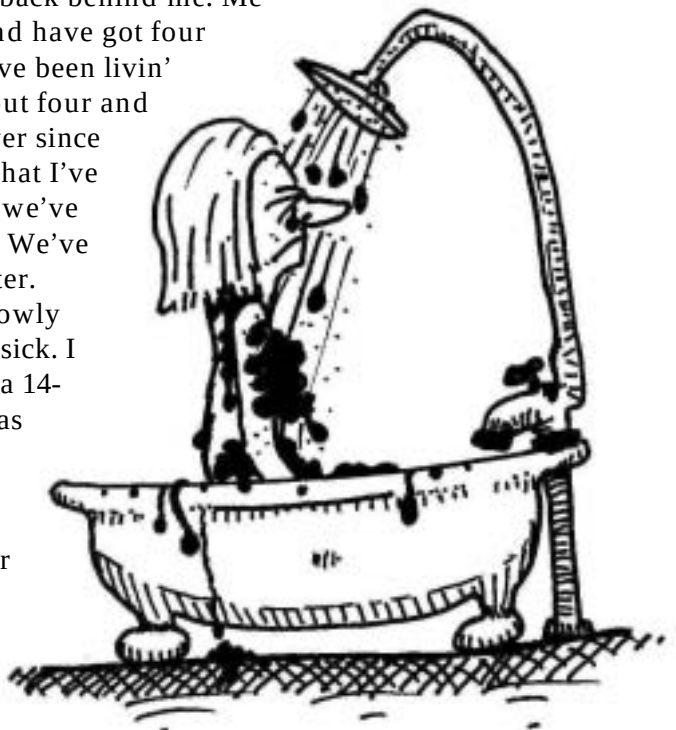
Especially for People Like Us

I'm Donetta Blankenship. I'm 39, from Rawl. I live up what they call Rawl Holler. It's Rawl, Lick Creek, Sprigg, Merrimac – those areas is tryin' to get water. There's an impoundment back behind me. Me and my husband have got four kids. Myself, I've been livin' at Rawl for about four and a half years. Ever since then, the time that I've lived up there, we've had bad water. We've had smelly water.

I had slowly started getting sick. I have a 13- and a 14-year-old that has stomach problems, breathin' problems - after we moved up there. Before that, our health was OK. April of

2005, I ended up in the hospital. They told me that I had that auto-immune liver disease, and I know for a fact that I've never done anything to cause me to get it. I've never drunk, I've never done anything like that to damage my liver. But I do have a lot of papers sayin' that the things in our water does cause liver damage.

When I started out, my stomach was really botherin' me. It started swellin' a lot. I ended up gettin' jaundiced with it. That was when they told me I was goin' to the hospital. I was feelin' tired all the time, you know, just different things like that. When I went they told me that my liver enzymes was in the thousands. My doctor did tell me that my liver was failin'. I've even got osteoporosis. And I know one of the bacteria that's in the water will cause bone changes. There's just so many different things that's all of a sudden poppin' up. I know people does get these



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illnesses every day, but the things in our water is pushin' you to die faster, I feel like.

We're havin' to go and fight for water. I don't understand why. But it seems like they don't want to give us good, clean water up there. I think the people in our area deserve it as much as everybody else does. It's just not fair to us. Not too long ago, Truman Chafin [West Virginia Senate Majority Leader] did help us get some emergency funds for some bottled water. There's a few that will go up to Larry Brown's church and help unload it. My husband for one – because we want this good water. It's only right. I do use it now to cook with and to drink – to make my husband's coffee. Things like that.

But from what I understand, we still have the bad things in our system from bathin' in it. I have to wash the clothes in it. I've been noticin' lately that it don't do no good to wash the clothes. I've been puttin' peroxide on some of the washrags to do some cleanin' around the house, and the washrags just get all bubbly and hot. I thought peroxide took bacteria out of stuff – that shows that they're not clean. Sometimes the water is still kinda black, dark gray. We do have a water softener on ours, but the smell of it, the washrags, things like that, shows that's not even doin' no good. Not so much.

We have seen the coal slurry and oil run down our creeks because we have a creek next to our well. We see it all the time. They're takin' the coal slurry now and tryin' to put it in other places, usin' big trucks to haul it off with, and that's not even right.

The water has smelled some ever since we've lived there. Well, we've had a new double wide for the last year and a half. It's just gotten worse. There was a company that had told us if we got a new water heater the smell, the gas fumes would come out of the water heater because of it bein' new. Since October of 2004, the smell has been a lot worse- since we got the new water heater.

With me getting' sick like this, my 13-year-old daughter, she's scared to death. She has nightmares about me dyin'. My 14-year-old son, every once in a while he'll say something' like, I might die before his papaw. You can tell that bothers him. He's close to both of us. Lots of times when I get sick, everybody's on edge. They don't know what's gonna happen or anything. My husband's always askin' me to be sure I'm takin' my medicine all

Especially for People Like Us

the time. That's another thing that shows it's the water... I'm not doin' nothin' different. I'm takin' my medicine like I'm supposed to. And every time I go to my doctor, my enzymes are up or down. He was talkin' about it the other day that my enzymes was so unbalanced. They won't stay down like they're supposed to.

My son has bad breathin' problems he never had before. My daughter does some, but she's always had it. Not as bad, but she's had it some. Her biggest problem that she's had is stomach problems, and her 13-years-old. My son is all the time breakin' out, even on his face, with rashes. All over his back stays broke out with little bumps. My 20-year-old daughter, she had her gall bladder taken out when she was 19. My husband, he's got stomach problems, high blood pressure. He all the time gets boils on him. I've noticed lately he has a problem with his eye...I think it's his left one. The side of his nose is broken out with a rash, and his eye stays red-lookin' and burnin'. I wonder if he's getting' that water in his eye and doin' damage.

And we still have to bathe in it. With the six of us we'd never be able to go out and buy that much water. Even if two or three people would bath in the same water, still yet, to fill a tub just a little bit, we couldn't get that much water. I just look at it, "Well, I'm gonna have to bath some way." I wonder, the way it smells, if I stink after bathin'! To be sure I don't, I load myself down with body wash. With foam bath – with smelly soap, you know, anything. Even my hair, I get some kind of conditioner that smells good so it won't stink my hair up. We shouldn't have to do that.

If I could ask the Governor to do anything I wanted - I don't know if he'd do this - but I'd tell him why don't he come up and live in our house for a week! I don't think he'd do that. But if he tells me he couldn't do that, then why would we have to? I'm interested in seein' what that Jon Amores [West Virginia House Judiciary Chair] said about my water, 'cause I gave him a couple of things of my water last time I was here. And he kept it and had my name with it. I just wonder what he did. I don't think he took a drink of it!

We don't drink it, not now – not since I got out of the hospital. But before we was cookin' with it and everything. I would ask the Governor – not just for me, but for everybody in the community – to please try and understand and consider how bad we need water up there. I'd just ask him why are we havin'

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to suffer like that? Does he not really care, or don't he understand how bad it is? But if he don't understand, like I said, he can live in our house for a week. He might stay a day!

Especially for people like us, I might have to go through a lot it seems like, but I'll go and do as much as I can for them to have the same as me. Hopefully, good water and maybe get rid of the sludge and the coal dust and everything. I'm gonna go and fight as much as I can. 🌍

Because of Your Culture and the People

My name is Joan Linville and I live in Boone County, WV, in a little town called Van, which was named after my husband's grandfather. It's very dear to me, but since mountain top removal mining has moved in here, it's destroying everything I have worked for all my life. I am 67-years-old, and I cannot start all over again.

I lost my husband six years ago from pancreatic cancer, which I feel was contributed to by the work he done and the chemicals he was around at the mines. In our community everyone is dying of cancer, no one is dying a natural death any more - it's always cancer. They have poisoned our river here; they have taken our drinking water, closed our water plant because the water is so toxic.

On June 16, 2003, I become very much aware of what was happening around me because the mountains all come down around my house, and the river came out of the banks. It had been raining, and there is an abandoned mines – which I did not know – that was behind my house when I bought my property to build my home. I did not know that mines was there, because I didn't live here. An underground mine.

Every place on this mountain, on both sides, this was all Island Creek [property]. The Abandoned Mine Lands Fund – that was what the money was supposed to be for, was to clean up these messes in the state. They have not cleaned them up. In fact, the mountain behind my house is pumped full of slurry. My daughter stood and watched them pumping slurry from ponds into the mines in the back of my house. Also there is a leak comin' from the top of the mountain, and it comes out in the back of my house. The water runs 24/7 and it's from that mines. If it ever gets full enough, it will blow. It will blow out just like a bomb, and I will be killed instantly. I mean, my house is right there!

I had to spend \$2,000. I called the DEP [WV Department of Environmental Protection]. I called the county. I called everybody I knowed to call. Nobody did anything. I had to hire somebody to come in, tear my fence down, build a cinderblock wall because the mountain was slippin' down. Water was runnin' out of this abandoned mines in the back of my house. Would have runned underneath my house!

It just so happened that I had a garden spot beside of my house. I had bought a little lot 30 feet wide to have a garden in. I

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had an inloader to come through there, go to the back of my house, dig a trench. Bought pipe –cost me \$2,000 to have this done. Had to bring it all the way through my property from the back at the mountain out to the river to get rid of the water. Still yet, it stays damp. Everything molds. It's just nothing but black mold - I have to go out and clean it off all the time. The mountain behind is so saturated with water because they have filled those mines up above us with slurry and it just seeps into the ground constantly. So now we are fighting mold on top of everything else.

It's just an inhumane way to have to live. And you have to sue them to get any compensation in order to go somewhere else to live because it's so unhealthy to live here. I don't have the money to go somewhere else and buy another house. And I had a nice house. But they've destroyed my house. They're right behind me and I'm at the end of a strip and they are blasting constantly and they have busted the foundation of my house. They have busted the walls inside my house. You can see the stuff ...it's coming down on the walls. And they don't do anything. You call them and they just ignore you. They don't intend to do anything. The law needs to be enforced.

It's affecting my health, I've become an asthmatic. I have asthma - over the last ten years severe asthma. You have these coal trucks, logging trucks running all over our highways, killing people. There were two women killed here – young women – within five days apart. You're terrified to drive to the corridor [U.S. Route 119] now. It used to take 15 minutes to get there and now it takes 35 because of all the coal trucks. I mean you definitely do not want to hit one, because you don't have a chance if they hit you.

Really, it's inhumane. I feel it's inhumane what the coal companies here are doing to the people. You know coal always ruled in West Virginia. Yet we have so many natural resources here and it could be so much better instead of having all this dirty coal. There's no way they can make coal clean because it's just dirty.

They're taking our highways to haul coal - which they should not do – there's railroad tracks here. The roads are too narrow. The equipment they bring in takes up the whole road. If you don't move over, then you don't live, you know? They come and do what they want to and they treat us like we don't count –

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it doesn't matter what we think. It doesn't matter that we bought our homes and paid taxes here for years. It doesn't matter to them! They just want the coal and they want to fill their pockets. It's not the smaller men that are making all the money – it's the big CEOs and the companies.

And I just feel that it's against the law, really what they're doing. And it *should* be against the law the way they're treating

the people. They

could come

and try to

say,

"Hey,

we

want to

mine

coal

here,

and

we'd

like to

give you

a fair

price for

your

home and

not put you

through all this." But they don't do that. They move right in your back door and make your life a livin' hell for ten years or more. And if they don't come right into your back door then they won't buy you out. But they come within 30 feet of you anyway and you have to put up with their crap. And to me that is not right.

We eat coal dust. We breathe coal dust. It's in our eyes. It's in our house. It's on our clothes. Our car is covered with it every day and it's just an inhumane way to have to live in the United States of America. This is America, you know? And it's like a war zone - it really is! Nobody knows what kind of hell we go through here unless they come here and stay a while.

They are workin' just like a bunch of maggots on garbage all over the mountains here. They're just eatin' it up, you know? Every day they're just constantly on the road. These mountains are goin' to cave in where they're been workin' - onto the people!



Because of Your Culture and the People

There are at least three, maybe four slurry ponds up above my house, plus the abandoned mines behind it. Then there's one in front of me that goes all the way around the mountain.

If we ever have another rain like we did in 2003 that lasts that long,.... If the mines behind my house would ever explode – and they *have*, they have exploded - then all of this community is just going to be wiped out. We're going to be dead, just like that! They say they have an evacuation plan. It's a big laugh. It's no evacuation plan! When something happens here, if you can't get to the top of a mountain within a few minutes, you're gonna die! And with the slurry ponds up here, if one of those ponds ever breaks, everyone in this holler is gonna die. The ponds are so full of slurry, they will just cover the houses up. Everybody here'll drown. The force of it will just take us out.

They should pass a law that if they're gonna allow somethin' like this to happen, then the people should be evacuated and paid a decent price for their property. But it should not be allowed. There's nobody should be allowed to tear up God's creation that he has built. People live here because they want to live here, not because they have to.

I've lived here all my life. I came here when I was eight months old. My parents divorced and I was gone for maybe a year or two, but my dad brought me back when I was six years old. Back then, the community was really laid back, and a wonderful place to live. I was born in Kentucky, and my father went to Berea College in Kentucky but he couldn't find work. He was buildin' bridges around Middlesboro, Ky., and he heard there was work here in the mines. So he came to get a job so he could support his family. I was 8-months-old at the time.

My father liked it so good he never went back to Kentucky. He's buried here. He didn't want to go back. All his family's buried in Kentucky, but not him. He wanted to be buried where he lived and worked at Wharton. He's buried at the Ben Cemetery. I stayed here until I was out of high school. When I got married, we went to Colorado for seven years. But then we returned because we just missed it so bad. Colorado's a beautiful state, but it's not home, you know? It's not the West Virginia mountains and it's not the people that live here. So we returned back in 1967 and we never left again.

I've spent 55 years of my life in this state. And things has really changed with mountain top removal. I feel it could have

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been changed for the better. Like we've got that Toyota plant at Buffalo now. We had the most abundant of water – and good water – spring water. You could go into the mountains and drink the water. You can not do that now. They could have bottled and sold it. But they don't want us to have any industry here. They don't want us to have anything because they want to mine coal. They want the money, you know? They call it black gold. When are they gonna realize that you can't eat money? When are they gonna realize that?

We can't even have gardens here any more. We're afraid of the soil bein' so contaminated. You worry about the air you breathe. I don't want to see anyone mistreated, but when you start messin' with the water I drink and the air I breathe, then I'm gonna step forward and I'm gonna try to do somethin'. I didn't realize until 2003 what was really goin' on around me. And that's when I got involved. And I intend to stay involved 'til it's stopped, one way or the other. It's an inhumane act against people. It's an inhumane act against the land.

We don't need our people killed. And to think of these accidents we've had here. We've lost fourteen men within just a few days! They could have taken care of the problems a long time ago. They needn't act like they care for us now. They just got exposed because of the media. But how many men has died already, in vain? I mean, a little thing that the miners could carry so that they could find them in the mines and they didn't supply them with this? It's a dirty job and it's a dangerous job. Yeah, we might need coal, but they need to start lookin' to other sources to supply energy for this country. Clean energy! And it can be done. We need to spend more money for things like that.

I come from four generations of coal miners. My husband was a non-degreed engineer, He was a policeman, a highway patrolman for fourteen years. He decided to go into the mines after we was married for the benefits – for his family. That's the only reason he went in. He was a very smart man. I didn't want him to go in that coal mines and neither did my dad. My dad begged him not to. He said, "Don't do it, don't do it, don't do it! They'll promise you everything and you'll get nothing."

When my husband got ready to retire – seven weeks before he was due to retire – they closed the mines down where he was workin'. He was 54-years-old. He lacked just a few weeks of bein' able to retire and get his benefits. They took all our

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benefits – our hospitalization, our life insurance - everything they took from us! We had no insurance whatsoever for 12 years up until he died. This is why my dad did not want my husband to go in the coal mines. My husband offered to go to Wyoming, anywhere, to get the rest of that time in. And he was never called back. He was taken ill real soon with the cancer. So I was without insurance – he was without insurance. That's just the way they work. They want that coal but they don't take care of their people. They never have. It's turned me against coal, really it has. I know people needs jobs here, but they don't need these kind of jobs.

People here are hard-workin' people. They're *independent* people. We raise our kids to be independent. Our women here are the backbones of these families. And we are raised to support our husbands. If they don't make enough money to put food on the table, we are raised to get out and work also. You will not find stronger women anywhere...or smarter women. We're not just book smart. We're common sense smart. We want everybody to know that. They think we're all stupid hillbillies that are uneducated.

They're dealin' with a whole new breed of people. I have a daughter that's workin' on a doctor's degree. She hates this! She comes home and says, "Mom, this should not be!" So I want people to realize that not everyone in West Virginia is uneducated.

We're taught such deep-rooted things from the time we're born. About our grandparents and how to survive. How to grow food, in case we do need to survive! How to make clothes. I even taught it to my kids. It's just passed down. My grandmothers taught it to me, and I teach it to mine. And I expect mine to teach it to theirs, no matter where they live. They don't live here because of the way things is. They would love to live here if they could make the money.

I feel that I have dedicated the rest of my life to fightin' mountain top removal. I hope I live long enough to see it stopped, because I think West Virginia is one of the most beautiful states in the United States and we have some of the most wonderful people in the world here. I have traveled out west and lived for ten years in Colorado. I have been in Texas. I have been in the Carolinas – just about everywhere. But you always have that longing to come back home because of your culture and the people, and also the beauty of the state. I think that they just

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intend really to make a toxic dump out of this state, and they'll do it unless we fight for our beautiful state. We are losing a heritage of people here.

I wanted to say too, about the people that live here, when there's a death in the family or people loses their job, not many people has to look for welfare. The people around, the neighbors, take care of them. If they're sick, we get up in the middle of the night, and we go take a neighbor to the hospital if necessary. We are people that treat others like humans. It's the coal company that don't treat us like humans. We take care of our own here. I want to make that clear. It doesn't make any difference what the problem is. If they're out of work, we go get them groceries. We help them pay their power bill. And churches help. You don't find that in many places now. We do take care of others.

I am alone now, and have been for six years. If I didn't have friends and neighbors here, do you think I could stay here? I'd have to leave the state and go with other family members. As long as that continues, I'll be here to fight! 🌍

An Evil Parallel Universe

I'm Vernon Haltom. I live in Naoma, West Virginia. In the past few years, things have gotten progressively worse if you look at pictures of areas that mountain top removal has moved into, especially above Marsh Fork Elementary School. I live maybe a five-minute drive from there. If you look at pictures even from 2002 until the present you can see where the mountains are being just decapitated. Now it's where you can drive down the road and see the mountain up behind the sludge dam is now bare of trees, which means the next thing is going to be that the mountain itself will be gone. So I've seen it get progressively worse that way.

Sludge spills are not a daily occurrence, but too common of an occurrence. I don't live directly under a sludge dam, but I work under a sludge dam. If that one were ever to go, I would be dead, and everybody in the town would be dead. This is going to be nearly a nine billion gallon sludge dam when they're finished with it, and they're already pretty close to it, I'm sure.

And it's built by the same company that was responsible for the sludge dam that failed in Martin County, Ky., in the year 2000. That was just six years after they'd had another disaster from the same sludge dam. And the one I work under, like that one, is built over abandoned underground mines.

In the valley where I live, mining has been going on since people have been there, so some of the mine shafts I'm sure are not mapped. And the ones that are mapped may not be mapped very accurately. We saw a few years ago in Pennsylvania what happened when those workers had a disaster with their underground maps, so that bothers me. That worries me to know that just by going to work I'm sitting there under a potential disaster.

Every day, almost every day, I hear blasting. It's one of the first things after I get home. I don't just hear the blasting, but I feel the blasting. It's not just the loud sound, the ground actually shakes. My floor actually shakes. So as far as improving my home, I have to think in terms of what is going to be blast-resistant.

One of the things that surprised me about mountain top removal is the amount of explosives used. A few years ago, when folks started checking into this, somebody asked DEP how much explosives were used, and DEP didn't know. The Coal

Association didn't know.

But the Institute of Makers of Explosives had a yearbook. They publish each year how much explosives are used in each state, and what they're used for. In West Virginia it's used for mining, the vast majority of it being used for surface mining. In West Virginia we use the equivalent explosive force of 20 atomic bombs per year, of the type used on Hiroshima. And that's year after year. I don't see how any state or any region can withstand that kind of pounding continuously. I mean, what other area would be happy about being blown up that severely? And in West Virginia, nearly two-thirds of the people are opposed to mountain top removal, but it's not a very vocal two-thirds.

What is vocal is the industry that says they're providing all these wonderful jobs and so much economic prosperity, when, in fact, West Virginia is almost dead last in every meaningful economic indicator. If coal is so good for us, why are we in such bad shape?

As far as mountain top removal goes, we [Coal River Mountain Watch] monitor permits and see the permits for upcoming mines just moving steadily along the ridge lines. And it's not just the ridge lines, it's hundreds of feet. Plans are in the works to decapitate Coal River Mountain. On one side of the river and coming up the other side of the river, just moving upstream. And as they do that, it puts me and my neighbors at greater risk of flood. It's going to increase the amount of blasting, which everybody in the valley hears. The sizes of the explosions they set off, you can't avoid hearing it.

I worry about the children that go to school at Marsh Fork Elementary. You know they hear it. For a time the company had stopped blasting during school hours, but they have since resumed blasting. There's a sludge dam above the school just 400 yards, a coal silo next to the school. And it seems like no matter what we do, no matter what the facts are, and no matter what the common sense says, there are TV ads, and lots of publicity by the coal industry saying they're so good for us. I don't see it.

What really moved me to become involved in the work was seeing a mountain top removal site first hand. I'd heard about it and seen some pictures. When I first heard about it, I thought, "mountain *top* removal—that doesn't sound so bad." I thought maybe a few feet off the top. That sounds like going to the barber and getting a trim. But instead, it's like going to the

barber and having your head chopped off. Actually, chopped off at the shoulders or the chest – or the navel! Right though the heart.

I went to Kayford Mountain and saw it first hand. It's just stunning. That's the reaction I've seen in the other people I've taken up there who see it for the first time. Their jaw drops. They can't believe it. The scope of it is so huge that you can't accurately portray that in a picture. You can't accurately portray it in words. You see it out in front of you, where there used to be a mountain and now there's a barren plain. And no matter what they say about reclamation, it's just not anything to brag about. The reclamation is so sparse and eroded and has nothing that anyone should allow to begin with. And of course, there's no economic development at all, which they're supposed to do.

But seeing it firsthand got me more active in the situation. Sometimes you are faced with a situation that just won't let you sleep. And there are times when you do work as late as your eyes will allow you to work, and then you wake up the next morning and you're back at it again. And it's what you talk about over dinner. It's what you think about when you're watching TV. It's what you do on the computer. It's what you talk about in the car. It's what you live with, when you're just trying to work in your garden and the ground under you shakes. So you can't really ignore it. Well, I guess you could ignore it – some people can ignore it. But a lot of people don't – they just can't. And I couldn't.

A few months ago I had the opportunity to go on a fly-over. Christians for the Mountains arranged some fly-overs. And that's another perspective. Seeing it on the ground is one thing, and seeing it from the air, it's just magnified. It's like something out of a science fiction movie. And it does seem like we're in a Twilight Zone sometimes. Some of the people who have come here from other states see it, hear about it, and learn about it, and they say it's like going into the Twilight Zone. Some kind of evil parallel universe. Where else in the world can you take the mountains off and brag about it? Where else in the world can you put a sludge dam and a coal silo next to an elementary school and some of the parents actually thank the coal company for doing that? It builds character, you know – if it doesn't kill you it makes you stronger. Well, I think in this case, I don't see how coal dust is going to make you stronger. I don't see how sludge is going to

make you stronger. It is a Bizarro World.

But the flip side is, the little place where I live is so beautiful! I look out my back door and there's a mountain there full of beautiful trees and all kinds of understory, and mayapple, cohosh, and probably some things that aren't even catalogued yet. Occasionally they do find species of either animals or plants here that nobody's identified anywhere else in the world. And I look out the other window and there's the river. Where I live, so far, the river is still relatively clean. We have giant rocks with moss over them and gnarly trees. It looks like something from a Tolkien novel. You expect little dwarves or elves to pop out from some of these places. And that is so beautiful – I wouldn't want to leave. I do want to protect what we have. It infuriates and outrages me that these beautiful places are all over – and they're being destroyed all over.

There's a place I went about a year ago that you couldn't tell that any human being had ever been there. No trash, no litter. I think there was one part of a foundation where the moss had covered the rocks. It was probably a hundred years old or so. And there was a place where there was a little waterfall. And the water was so pure and clean coming off this waterfall that I thought, "Shoot, I'm gonna drink some of this." So I did, and I didn't seem to have any ill health effects from it or anything. It is that beautiful there, and there are other places like that. But to the coal industry these places are just overburden – just packaging they need to rip through as fast as they can to get to their product.

It is a shame that there are people who know about it and don't care. And it's a shame that there are people who only see the dollar signs. They don't see the destruction to not just the natural beauty – we rarely even talk about the natural beauty – it's the communities, and the lives that people are having destroyed because of it. When you see a town flooded and you just know that the water came from a mountain top removal site, you wonder how that can be allowed. You know that when you remove the trees, when you remove the topsoil, when you remove all the little ridges and rills that catch the water and hold the water and channel it naturally – when you remove all that and then have floods, how much common sense and how much science and how many lawsuits does it take to make people do the right thing?

An Evil Parallel Universe

I think if people would just look in their hearts they could think, “Is it worth that dollar bill to put somebody else’s life in jeopardy?” I wish people would think about that. I wish people would think how they spend their money. Is that dollar putting somebody at risk? Is it somebody who didn’t ask to be below a sludge dam, somebody who didn’t ask to be flooded out, somebody whose family has been in the same holler or the same valley for nine generations? To ask them to put their life and their children’s lives at risk so that somebody a thousand miles away can make a buck – that’s just wrong. And mountain top removal is an issue of right and wrong. There’s no kind, sweet, gentle way of finding a happy medium. The one side has been so extreme in their destruction, I don’t see them ever coming around to any kind of happy medium. I don’t see a happy medium. I mean it’s right or it’s wrong. There’s not really a gray area here. 🌍



About the Artist

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attached to the land where I played, explored and worked every day. It's where I learned to love and respect nature. My family and I traveled all over the region together, camping and hiking. I remember the first time I saw the Appalachian mountains I was so amazed. They were beautiful; it was like going to another country in my own back yard. What is happening to these mountains and these people is a shame. I can't believe there are people in this world willing to destroy truly wonderful parts of our country for a little more coal."

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