In Praise of
MOUNTAIN WOMEN

10th Anniversary

the continuing vision

THIS LAND IS HOME TO ME

Design by Nancy Balow of Mother Wit
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Women's Task Force - Catholic Committee of Appalachia

Acknowledgements

In all cultures and traditions the sharing of the story has been a basis for reflecting on the present and for envisioning the future. The Judaic-Christian scriptures are filled with stories that have expressed, challenged, and modeled our understanding of relationship: to God, to self, to others, and to the earth.

The Women's Task Force of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia has gathered some stories of this time and this place as a basis for understanding how the Spirit speaks today. The women who share their stories in this booklet are mountain folk, ordinary people living and working in Appalachia, struggling to define and defend right relationship, claiming for themselves and for their children the power to shape their future.

The stories were told simply -- in the kitchen, at the dining table, on the porch, to a friend. They were then edited by Beth Spence from tapes and put into booklet form. The goals of the Task Force were these: to give voice and visibility to the often unheard stories of ordinary women; to praise and celebrate the struggle and the dreams of mountain women; to identify some of the values held by many Appalachian women which bond them to women throughout the nation and the world in a common struggle to claim dignity, integrity, and the means to form community; to recognize that theology is not an abstract understanding of God but an evolving understanding of the lived experience of the Spirit and of relationship that empowers persons to find and create human community.

Special gratitude is given to the members of the Women's Task Force of CCA who were willing to translate a dream of what might be into this booklet. They spent hours taping and transcribing. Thanks also to Beth Spence. Her life as writer prepared her for the task of collating, integrating and editing words from a variety of sources. Her belief that many people together can create a whole greater than what one can achieve alone enabled the group to produce a truly collaborative collection of stories. So often an idea depends upon financial support to become visible. Without the belief by many that this project had value, and the support of that belief by generous donations, this booklet would have remained only a dream. To all who contributed resources as project seed money, thanks. Finally, the members of the Women's Task Force offer their sincere thanks to the women who said yes when asked to share their stories.

This booklet is seen as a small link in a chain bonding women who struggle. We recognize that it is only words. "Writing is such a passive thing. You sit back and talk to people and you're not really doing anything for them. Sometimes the stories move people in some way, but you yourself don't..." (B. Spence) It is our hope that the strength of the women whose stories this booklet shares will empower all of us to act on behalf of justice for ourselves and for our children. As Beth says, "If you keep on plugging there may be some hope down the road. And what you're thinking about is not something that will happen during your lifetime. You're part of a chain that started long before and will go on long after; and someday, somehow -- if someone else grabs ahold when we let go -- then perhaps everything we've been dreaming of and fighting for will be realized."

Gratitude is given to the core members of the Women's Task Force who wondered and wished and worked an idea into a reality. Special thanks to those who gathered stories and photographs: Kathy Britt, Nancy Fackner, Beth Davies, Elizabeth Vines, Pat Hussey, Barbara Ferraro, Sue Julian, Diane Reese, Gretchen Shaffer, Sally Van Osdell, Chuck Wyrostok, Michael Tierney, Cindy Eckeroth, Barbara Kukla. Thanks to Beth Spence for her willingness to shape a new editing process, and deep appreciation to those persons and groups who provided a fiscal base for this booklet: Barbara Radtke, the Social Action Committee of St. Mary's Seminary, the Sisters of St. Dominic of Racine, the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Wheaton Franciscans, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, the Adrian Dominicans, the Congregation of Sisters of Divine Providence, the Congregation of Notre Dame, and the Executive Board of CCA.

Introduction

In early 1985 the Women's Task Force of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia decided to pay tribute to women they had met in connection with their work.

These were women who moved CCA members by their dedication to their families, their communities, their work. They range in age from 26 to 90. Some work out of the home. Most have spent their lives raising children and fighting a persistent battle for survival. Others have stood up against racism, sexism, war and the countless other oppressions to which people fall victim.

These are not the rich and famous. On the contrary, these are women who in most cases live in very rural areas at the cutting edge of the most abject poverty.

Behind some of their stories are others too painful to recount and too humiliating to see on the printed page. They are stories of broken marriages, shattered dreams, brutality, child abuse, incest and even murder.

But knowing the obstacles these women have endured makes us admire them even more. Their lives illustrate the most basic kind of human valor. Theirs are stories of the triumph of the human spirit and a measure of its limitless potential.

In praising them, we praise gentle people everywhere who struggle to overcome overwhelming odds, and, by doing so, show us how to light candles rather than curse the darkness of despair.

Beth Spence

Nora Sturgill Dillon

Spirit of the Mountains

To many of her friends and neighbors, Nora Sturgill Dillon is the archetypical Appalachian woman -- the silent but eloquent spirit of the mountains that bred her.

A woman of quiet strength, Nora has lived her life in the shadow of men towering above her, letting them do the talking and allowing the spotlight to settle on them. But hers are the hands that have turned the churn and rocked the cradle, hands that have tended tiny babies and brawny men with equal tenderness, hands that have cared for the sick, buried the dead and made the earth yield good food.

Although she was born in a coal camp in Logan County, Nora was raised in the close-knit community on the hilltop ridge above Marrowbone Creek in Mingo County, West Virginia, known as the Knob.

One of 12 children, she describes her early life as a lot harder than that of her grandchildren growing up today.

"But we were used to it," Nora said. "We got our own wood and coal and carried our water and walked to school. To them now it would seem to be impossible almost."

Nora Sturgill and Claude Dillon lived on adjoining hilltops. They met when she

was eight and he was ten. Claude came to know Nora when Nora's sister Mandy was stricken with cancer and the women in the community responded with help for the family. Mandy died at the age of 13 when Nora was nine.

In the next few years, it came to be Nora's lot to care for the sick, the elderly and the dying in the community. She nursed her great-aunt Jane Sturgill Meade and she cared for Aunt Mandy Hannah, the matriarch of another mountain family. There were others who required her help and Nora tended them with loving care in their last days.

At the age of 19, she gave birth to the first of her 13 children. Her second child was born in 1941, just 18 days before the United States entered World War II. Not long after the birth of the child, Claude went off to fight in the war. With her husband away for the duration, Nora was left alone to cope with the two small babies. Although she had little money and no outside help, she managed exceptionally well.

When Claude came home in 1945, suffering from the effects of war and military life, Nora cared for him and helped him recover.

A great source of strength for Nora is her faith and hope in God. This faith has helped sustain her through what others might describe as a life of deprivation.

That faith has been her lifeline through many crises -- the drowning of a son at the age of 18 in Marrowbone Creek, the loss of two stillborn infants, the constant care of a child born with Down's Syndrome.

"Nora is wise in the art of survival," a friend commented. "She has learned to use her own resources and to encourage the same in others. She has been one who has been able to scratch and pick. She's a woman who can live simply in a society of rampant consumers."

She also is a woman who has lived in harmony with her earth, taking and giving, always careful to put back into the land as much as she has taken out.

When asked to share her story, Nora said eloquently, "Who better to tell the story of the land than we who all our lives have lived and loved upon it."

Nora works in the gardens side by side with her husband and spends her days scouring the hills for herbs and berries.

"I love the outdoors and I've always raised a garden," she said. "Every year we raise a good garden. We have plenty of canned stuff. We could feed a lot of people if it was necessary out of the cellar and tater holes."

Claude and Nora's house -- a cozy log home built by Claude and his sons -- is situated at the end of the paved road at the foot of the mountain below the community-built and sustained Big Laurel School.

The Dillons' home is a gateway to the Big Laurel Community and has long served as a stopping-off point for visitors who sometimes leave their cars and walk the rest of the way up the mountain.

Often the outsider's first opinion of the school and community and even the mountain culture is shaped by Nora Dillon.

Her whole-hearted support for the school is mixed with a pang of regret that she had to move off of the mountain in order for her children to get an education, something that was very important to her.

"We're just sorry it didn't start 25 years ago because we'd probably still be on the hilltop," she said of the school. "I think kids is a lot better off that go to school on the hilltop than they are in the schools where there's so many together. I think they learn

a lot more. I know they're taught a lot more manners.

"I'd liked for mine to all get an education. All of them didn't graduate from school, but they went enough 'til they could all get jobs and work about anywhere they go. All my kids are working."

Several of Nora's children have left Marrowbone Creek and settled in the midwest in Columbus, Ohio, and in Indiana. Like many other mountain youths, they went where they could find jobs. While Nora goes to visit them, she says she wouldn't want to stay too far from Marrowbone Creek for very long.

"I like the country," she says simply. "I don't like Columbus at all. I don't think I'd like to stay there. I like it here."

Claude once went to Dayton, Ohio, to work for General Motors. But he was only gone for six months. He couldn't stay. She has never left.

It is difficult to imagine Nora Dillon surviving on the steaming concrete of city sidewalks, separated from her beloved mountains. Her skills -- quilting, sewing, canning, gardening and caring for generations of children -- are those nurtured in the Appalachian culture. And her love of the land is a passion born of country living.

"I like country living," she said. "I like to get out to walk when it's pretty weather and I like to get out in the snow when it snows. Most of my livelihood is around my home and in my home."

Rich in resources within, Nora Dillon is a woman who knows the greens of spring will follow the snows of winter. She knows well the pain of childbirth and the joys that come with raising and nurturing children. She knows the solemn strength that comes with burying the dead. She knows the simple pleasure of using milk and egg money to buy store-bought treasures of ribbon, hard candy and small toys for her children and grandchildren. The world she loves and which sustains her is a simpler world.

Sometimes she longs for the days she knew as a child on the mountain. She muses about that world which doesn't exist any more, lost in a blur of electronic inventions and modern technology.

"I'd like to see it go back to the way it was when we grew up because I think people had more love for each other," she said.

"I'm sure they had more time. We didn't have televisions or radios. So the community generally came to our house. And we enjoyed that. Kids these days has television but, I don't know, it just don't seem to me that they enjoy themselves like we did back then."

Asked if she has had a happy life, Nora smiles. "Yeah, I wouldn't want to change a thing," she said. "I tell 'em that all the time. If I had my life to live over, I wouldn't want to change a thing."

In many ways neither Appalachia nor the world will see Nora's kind again. The society she recalls so lovingly has all but disappeared. But she is sowing seeds of caring with those whose lives she touches and she is striving to create a future for those who come after her.

In her quiet way, Nora Dillon has achieved a touch of immortality. Her name will long be spoken by those fortunate enough to have known her, and she will be an inspiration for generations yet unborn.

"She is clothed in strength and dignity, she can laugh at the days to come."

-- Proverbs 31.

Bonnie Lewis

The Soul of an Artist

The story of Bonnie Lewis's life can be told by her hands -- strong, sturdy, work-worn hands that have cleaned other people's houses to keep her family together; gentle hands that have stroked the feverish head of a sick child through many a long and frightening night; creative hands that have allowed Bonnie to hang onto a hard-scrabble independence in a land where jobs for women are scarce and low-paying.

For Bonnie Lewis is a quilter. She also is an artist and a dreamer.

Her quilts and wall-hangings are not merely utilitarian bed covers or traditional patchwork designs. They are original creations inspired by the mountainous Kentucky backroads Bonnie has always called home and the poetry that dances through her mind as her fingers work along the lengths of colorful material.

"I started to quilt when I was 15, making quilts for the family," she said. "I found out I could quilt and make money so I quilted for people. Then I started selling quilts. So one thing led to another, and I just kept selling quilts and making a little money. It helps."

Quilting also gave Bonnie a security net during her hardest times, especially in those dark days when, as a 23-year-old uneducated widow, she faced a daily struggle

to provide for her five young children.

Sitting in the kitchen of what was once her grandmother's house, Bonnie rocks back and forth in a hand-hewn rocking chair. The chair's wooden creak provides a gentle rhythm for her story of financial hardship and despair, of determination and survival, of memories that stretch back more than forty years to a nomadic existence that ended when her father scraped together enough money to buy the land that has been home for five generations of his family.

"We lived in a coal camp, and then my dad bought this piece of land and we moved up here," Bonnie recalled. "This was the first homeplace that my grandparents had owned all their lives and they were old. And then my dad gave his mom and dad a place and that was the only home they ever owned. They had just moved around."

The land opened the door to an exciting new world which Bonnie explored with her two younger sisters (a brother would come along much later, after Bonnie was married and had children of her own).

But even as children, Bonnie and her sisters understood the importance of the land. It was the thing that held the family together in hard times and in good times. It was the thing that allowed the generations to be together. And it was the security in an often uncertain economic world.

"We knew every hill and every rock and everything in this holler when we were young," she said of the land, which has been home to her ever since.

"And then I married when I was about fifteen," Bonnie said. "I dropped out of school when I was a freshman in high school."

Bonnie does not talk much about the marriage, but when she does, the pain of the experience shows in her face.

"I didn't get along well with my husband," she says simply. "He was a drinking man, and he had a lot of problems."

When he died after eight years of marriage, Bonnie's five children were all under the age of seven.

"My oldest son, during this time, he helped me a lot. He was a good babysitter. And we used coal and wood. He was good about that. I could send him anywhere, and if he had one penny left over--if he bought groceries--he'd bring the penny back. I could always trust him," she said.

She watched her mother to learn the tricks to surviving the worst times.

"She taught us to survive. She had to learn to survive the hard way and she taught us," Bonnie said. "And I learned from the Depression. And I said, if they can do it, I can.

"So we raised gardens and canned food. We didn't have much money, but I used to sew for people, and I used to cut hair, and give permanents and house-clean, and just anything I could do to make a little money after the kids went to school," she said.

But while Bonnie did the things she had to do to survive, she thirsted for knowledge and the education she had given up at the age of 15.

When her children went to school, Bonnie, too, went back to school, first earning a GED, then a high school diploma. But she didn't stop there. Bonnie started taking college courses, one at a time as often as she could. She now has more than a hundred college hours and an associate degree in social work. But it wasn't easy. Bonnie, who lives four miles from the main road and who doesn't drive or own a car, had to rely on friends. Sometimes she had to walk or hitchhike to get to classes.

All the time Bonnie continued to quilt -- quilts with log cabins and tall trees and wild animals, quilts that told stories, quilts to hang on walls and quilts to cover beds.

"I'd just sew and quilt and sell the quilts and use the money for the family. Quilting is really a Godsend to me. It has kept me off welfare. And it's something I love to do," she said.

Quilting also allowed Bonnie to stay at home with her children and work around her other household duties.

"I went out to work several times, and I worked at the Piggly Wiggly (a local supermarket) in the deli at one time, and I worked as a teacher's aide," she said. "I found out I was much better home making quilts.

"It's easier on a woman my age, you see. My health is not that good any more, and I can work when I feel like it and when I'm sick, I can lay down," Bonnie explained.

"I try to do good work so I can get repeat orders. If you do good work, you get repeat orders. And minimum wage just doesn't pay that much. If you don't have much money, you can't afford a lot of cars and clothes. You're better off working at home."

Continuing her education opened doors for Bonnie that gave a new dimension to her work. It was in a college class that she was introduced to the noted Appalachian author and poet Jesse Stuart, whose work reflected the East Kentucky Bonnie knew so well.

Stuart's poetry became the inspiration for one of Bonnie's most ambitious projects, a work of art she calls simply her "Jesse Stuart Quilt."

"Each verse that I would read in my mind would become a picture of the mountains," she said. "So I began to put these pictures into patchwork -- the mountains, the trees, the cabins. I could just see the pictures as I read the poetry. So that just became something real to me, you know, that I can look out and see."

Today, Bonnie Lewis's five children are grown. Her three sons, all of them coal miners, live nearby. One of her daughters is stationed with the U.S. Army in Germany. The other daughter is married and lives in Connecticut.

But Bonnie's child-rearing days are not over. She is now raising Joe, the eight-year-old son of the daughter who is in Germany.

"I've had Joe since the day he was born," Bonnie said. "My daughter came to live with me. She was unmarried, and then she decided she would go in the army. So I just went ahead and raised up Joe."

Bonnie would like to see Joe, a bright and imaginative child, finish school and go to college, but she says she's not going to push him as she did her own children.

"I wanted different things for them, but they just wanted to work in the mines," she said. "I'll just do the best I can with Joe and he can do what he wants to.

"I say, 'Joe, you don't have to go to school,' and he says, 'Mommie, I want to go.' And I say, 'I'm not going to make you go to college,' and he says, 'I want to go.' And probably Joe will. Joe is real intelligent. He loves to write stories and he loves to tell stories, and he's got a big imagination. He'll probably do something. I don't know what, but he'll do something."

The role of mother is probably the one with which Bonnie is most concerned, and she hopes that all of her children someday have homes of their own. She recognizes that the land her father bought at the end of World War II has been perhaps the most important factor in her struggle for survival, and she wants her children to have that same security.

"Nobody gave it to you, you know. You bought it and it's yours. You feel safe and secure," she said. "You can raise your own food, and if there's no grocery money and no payday coming, you've still got your food canned up if you can raise it. Even if you don't have lights and if you don't have heat, you can manage to get out and get wood off your own land."

For herself, Bonnie hopes that she can stay reasonably healthy so she can continue to care for Joe.

"I wanted to do social work, that's what I wanted to do," she said, reflecting on her life. "I've got so many things that I wanted to do, but God has got me setting here, and it's probably for a reason. I've got Joe. I want to take care of Joe -- that's always been my biggest aim in life, to make sure my children are safe. I always put my children first."

Bonnie stopped rocking in the creaking chair and considered her life. Her hands came together, her faced relaxed.

"There's just a million women around here who are just like me. Nobody has it easy, but most of them are really attached to their children."

Mildred Miller

Crusader for Peace

For Mildred Miller, Nicaragua is a young child, a dark-eyed eight-year-old Mildred met on an incredible journey that gave a new dimension to the work for peace she had begun in the gentle, rolling hills of rural Roane County, West Virginia.

"I just absolutely fell in love with the people because we're so much alike," said Mildred, a spirited 64-year-old white-haired grandmother who risked her life to stand and pray in non-violent witness with the people of that country during a 1984 trip sponsored by the ecumenical peace organization Witness for Peace.

"The only Americans most Nicaraguans ever see are those who come to stand by them in their suffering. Thus, they believe all Americans oppose the war against them. They call it Reagan's war and the contras Reagan's employees," Mildred said.

When Mildred's Witness for Peace group was formed, the facilitator suggested that everyone translate his or her name into Spanish. But he told Mildred that because her name would not translate, she would have to be a Margaret.

"I told him I had had that name for a long time and I would find me a Mildred," she said. "And sure enough one day a beautiful little girl came up to me and someone whispered to me that her name was Mildred."

From that moment, Mildred Miller's two-week Nicaraguan trip became an intensely personal experience as her life intertwined with that of young Mildred.

"There are so many similarities with my growing up in Appalachia during the big depression and little Mildred growing up today in Jalapa," said Mildred.

"I never had an immunization shot and only saw a doctor one time before I was married. Prior to the revolution, there was no health care for the little Mildreds. Since 1979, health care is furnished by the government. It seems like a miracle that they immunized the whole country in one day."

Mildred said her young friend's chances of getting an education are about equal to the opportunities she had in West Virginia.

"Before high school I do not recall ever having a teacher that had a degree. A literacy campaign was launched in Nicaragua in 1980 for adults over 10. Those under 10 would be going to school. The illiteracy rate was 50 percent in 1975 and has been reduced to 13 percent, which is comparable to West Virginia's."

While she was in Managua, Mildred subscribed to one of the three Nicaraguan newspapers so she can continue to follow events in the country.

"Every time I read that a schoolhouse has been burned, a teacher kidnapped or murdered, I cannot resist uttering, 'Oh, God, there we go again destroying Mildred's chances for a better life," she said.

"Now that President Reagan has pressured Congress to commit $100 million more to finance the war against Nicaragua's Sandinista government and to let our CIA carry out the action, I am afraid that Mildred will not survive."

In Nicaragua, Mildred stayed in Jalapa with Corina and Adan Gomez and their five children. The Gomez home in the nearby mountains had been destroyed by the contras and, like thousands of other families, they had fled to Jalapa, whose population swelled from 3,000 to 12,000 almost overnight.

"At first I was more than a little apprehensive about living in a tiny four-room house with a family of seven, myself and the translator for the group. And then the rats got so bad in the translator's corner that he left, leaving me -- who can't speak Spanish -- alone with a family that did not speak a word of English."

But by the time she was ready to depart, Mildred was grateful that she had been alone with the family because it had given her an opportunity to forge deeper bonds with them and others she met.

"On my final day to work in the field, I was a little unsure about my directions to the bus to take me to the cooperative vegetable gardens," Mildred said, noting that since Jalapa is surrounded on three sides by Honduras, where the Contra camps are, there is not much room for error.

"I met a flood of people going in the opposite direction--cowboys with rifles strapped to their saddles, children selling tortillas and women with baskets on their heads. As I approached they greeted me with their big smiles and adioses. As this was the only Spanish word I knew, I began to wave and call adios. I was so happy because I knew I was among friends.

"I knew these people were not just being polite, but that they had recognized me as the white-haired gringo who had worshipped in their churches, visited their hospital, offered blood and shared their rice and beans," she said. "It was very important to me that they had accepted me as a friend for I did not want to be remembered as 'the Ugly American.'"

Mildred's new awareness of the critical importance of world peace, which was heightened by the Nicaraguan trip, actually began only a few years ago, after her husband Howard had retired, after they had moved back to the country after spending 40 years in Charleston, and when Mildred herself was approaching retirement age.

"I was moved to work for peace after I saw Dr. Helen Caldicott's movie showing the consequences of nuclear war," said Mildred who saw the film during a Lenten service at her local Presbyterian church. "That movie scared the living daylights out of me. I hadn't realized we could be blown up."

Both Mildred and Howard began to read everything they could find about the threat of nuclear war. They began to attend nuclear freeze rallies and then they started to talk to their neighbors and ask them to sign petitions supporting a freeze on nuclear weapons.

Working for peace in her own community wasn't easy, Mildred said. "A lot of people just don't want to hear about it. I could go and talk about the neighbors -- if someone's shacking up or something -- and that's fine, but they didn't want me to bother them with this. It's uncomfortable.

"I can understand why friends and neighbors resented me," Mildred said. "It is scary when one feels all snug and secure and some nut comes along and says 'get off of cloud nine or we are all going to be blown up.'"

Sometimes the things Mildred learned made her angry. "I was able to obtain a copy of the Civil Defense list of fallout shelters, and they say in case of a nuclear catastrophe, I am to go to Linden school. Linden school is an abandoned building and not as safe as my house -- as if there is anyplace to hide."

Mildred had doors shut in her face. "I was threatened to be fired from a job of 20 years as well as another volunteer job. A public library was off limits and I was heckled in my own presbytery when I asked for an endorsement of the nuclear freeze."

Then, when she got back from Nicaragua, Mildred was greeted by a letter in the local newspaper saying she was a communist.

"Being called communist hurt the most," she said. "I work for peace not because I do not love my country, but because I do love my country."

In Mildred's mind, the attacks are part of a price she pays for her adherence to a set of principles that are for her synonymous with Christianity.

"I often thought that if anybody would ask me when I became a Christian, even though I played at it from the time I was knee-high to a duck, I would say in 1983 it became absolutely a commitment with me," she said. "That was the turning point. From then, instead of worrying about theology, I just thought, just let me do what I can. I will try."

Until that time, Mildred Miller had led what she considered a very ordinary life. The oldest of four children, she was raised on the Roane County farm, and although the family was poor, that wasn't unusual for the area or the time.

"We were as poor as people in Nicaragua are poor," she said. "I knew what it was for your shoes to wear out before summer came. I was a child during the Depression in the 1930s, and fortunately they had extended the bus service and I got to go to Spencer to high school."

It was on the school bus that Mildred met Howard, who was able to return to school after a four-year absence because of the extension of the bus run.

They were married when Mildred was 17 and moved to Charleston. Howard worked at the DuPont plant, Mildred went to business school and worked as a secretary and the couple raised two children.

Looking back, Mildred can see little in her early life to suggest that she would become a crusader for peace in her retirement years. Nor was she involved in any community or political activities during the more than 40 years she and Howard lived in Charleston.

"All I wanted to do was come back home," she said of the Roane County farm. "Everybody says it's so far out here and asked me if I didn't want to keep the house in Charleston. But I said I didn't leave anything there. I don't want to go back."

In the country Mildred and Howard grew organic vegetables and raised sheep as they enjoyed the clean air and rich land of their 78-acre farm. Before they went to the church Lenten service, there was nothing to distinguish them from any other retirement-age couple beginning to wind down their lives.

Since their awakening, they have been a dynamic team, surprising younger co-workers with their energy and dedication. And until Mildred went to Nicaragua, the work for peace was something the Millers did together.

"He would have gone to Nicaragua," Mildred said of Howard, "but he couldn't because of his health. With heart problems, you don't have the medical care there. But Howard paid my way and kept a candle burning in our window. And after I came home, he ran the slides when we went to churches and talked about the trip. He had heard me do it fifty times and people finally got to saying that we both had gone to Nicaragua and we got to where we just quit correcting them."

Mildred believes that because she and Howard are older than most of those active in the freeze movement in the state, they have been the subject of a number of newspaper articles.

"I think what they get a story out of is our ages," she said. "You're retired, you could just sit down and do nothing, and yet you keep fighting. One of the local people said, 'Why would anyone at your age leave your family at Thanksgiving time to come to that Godforsaken place?'"

Mildred reflected on that question and believed she found the answer in a conversation with a Roman Catholic sister in Spencer.

"She said to me, 'All of these years God has been preparing you for this.' I said, 'Well, it took a long time," but I will never forget how she said it. I was real impressed with her because no one else seemed to understand what I was doing and she was crying, she had tears in her eyes."

After her return from Nicaragua, Mildred became, if anything, even more compelled to speak out about peace and against U.S. intervention in Central America. She and Howard wrote letters, took their slide show everywhere they could and talked to anyone who would listen.

Then in June 1985, Mildred was one of four persons arrested for refusing to leave the Charleston office of U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd.

"My intention was not to break the law but to ask him why he had just voted to give $27 million in military aid to the Contras," Mildred said. "We told his aides that we wanted to talk with the Senator in his Washington office and would stay until he spoke with us."

Five o'clock came without a call and the group was arrested, handcuffed and told they would go to jail for six months if they didn't leave.

"I thought I was going to jail for six months right then," said Mildred, who was released on her own recognizance. "Actually, it was scary when you've lived as long as I have and never had a parking ticket. But it was worth it because I thought then somebody would at least listen to me."

But the case has never gone to trial, which is a source of frustration for Mildred because she believes she and the others are being ignored.

"I never felt like I got anybody to understand," she said. "I did it in hopes that the people there would know that I did it. I had at least wanted Mildred and them in Nicaragua to know why I did this.

"The lady who cooks for the people who troop through the rented house of Witness for Peace in Managua had this to say, 'You have left your love on every foot of soil here and we will never forget you.'

"I wanted them to know that I, too, would never forget."

Josephine Marshall Moore

Softener of the World

She is tall and thin, almost regal in appearance, her white hair pulled into a neat bun at the nape of her neck. She sits erectly in her chair, a cameo of another era, a time of greater formality, of hand-embroidered tablecloths and softly-lit parlors, a time when the Civil War was more than a distant memory.

And yet, as she leans forward to offer the wisdom of her 90 years, echoing the encouragement and inspiration that she instilled in three generations of school children, Josephine Marshall Moore's message is surprisingly contemporary, her views drawn from a keen understanding of a complex modern world.

The granddaughter of a slave, Mrs. Moore has seen vast and tumultuous change in her lifetime, none more significant than the sweeping social revolution that rocked the nation in the 1950s and 60s. But even at the height of the Civil Rights movement, as cities burned and youths raised their voices in support of Black Power, Josephine Moore remained what she always has been -- a peacemaker who believes in her own worth and that of others, black and white.

"Perhaps I've been lucky," Mrs. Moore says, "but I can't remember a time in my life when I haven't known a fine white person. The happy people are those who spread peace, who wouldn't do to anyone else that which they wouldn't do to themselves. They're the softeners of the world."

To a remarkable degree, Mrs. Moore has lived the lessons she has preached, and, at ninety, is at peace with herself and her world.

Mrs. Moore grew up outside Baltimore, Maryland, one of two children. Her maternal grandfather came out of slavery to become a Methodist minister. "He had a terrific mind," Mrs. Moore said. "If he had had a college education, he would have been a giant. All the Bible I know now, I learned from him."

Her father, a valet for one of the wealthiest men in the nation, traveled all over the world and stayed in the finest hotels.

"The boss bought books and my father read them," she said of the man who taught his only daughter a love of knowledge and a belief in the value of hard work even as he spoiled her with little presents and trips to the circus.

"When he took us to the circus, my mother would say, 'Henry, please don't buy them everything they want.' We'd hug him and we could get everything we wanted."

But Mrs. Moore's mother, despite her attempts, was not the strict disciplinarian either. "My mother was a jewel," she said, her eyes softening and her smile almost girlish as she recalled the woman who saw to it that she had both the material goods and the moral values she would need in a complicated world. "She kept a little jar with change in a closet shelf in the dining room. I loved her. We could touch her for a lot of things."

Mrs. Moore's mother was one of those self-sacrificing and civic-minded women who are the backbone of churches and community organizations.

"She worked in the church and the YWCA and the Eva Jennifer Neighborhood Club, a group that worked to better the community. The members were from among the educated leaders. They ran a shelter house and looked after girls coming in from small towns. She gradually got into white organizations -- she never made great statements, she just did what needed to be done."

A bright, lively child who loved to go into the city with her father so she could spend her allowance on trinkets behind the counter of the five and dime stores, Mrs. Moore didn't learn about racial prejudice in her home.

"Race was just never a part of the conversation," she said. "We were surrounded by white people. As a child growing up, the nicest friend I had was a wealthy white girl. I had good parents, intelligent parents. They saw to it that we had what nice people ought to have."

Because there was no high school for black children in the area, Mrs. Moore's father moved the family into Baltimore City so that she and her brother could continue their schooling.

The resumes of her teachers read like a Who's Who, Mrs. Moore said. "They were from the best colleges in the north, and there were no jobs open to them, so they went to Baltimore. They never talked about prejudice. You had a segregated system, and you wanted to be the best in that system. They brought us up to believe a new day was coming and we should be ready when the openings were there. I grew up when integration wasn't even a word -- who thought of it in 1909 when I was in high school."

Heeding the advice of her teachers and following in the footsteps of many intelligent blacks of that day who had the opportunity to go to college, Mrs. Moore trained to be a teacher at Morgan State College in Baltimore and at Cheyney State College in Pennsylvania. After teaching in Darling, Pennsylvania, at Glen Mills School for Girls and in Illinois, she came to Charleston, West Virginia, in response to a need for black educators. The year was 1924.

For the next thirty-odd years, Mrs. Moore taught sixth grade at the all-black Boyd School on Jacobs Street in Charleston, near where she now lives. "The inner office of the school had been the first Negro school in the area," she said. "They added on a section at a time -- the primary, elementary and senior high schools."

When Mrs. Moore arrived in the state, she stayed with a woman who lived in the

neighborhood where the school was located. It was an interesting few blocks with blacks and whites living on different sides of the same streets. Parking lots and businesses and interstate highways have encroached on the neighborhood just west of Charleston's warehouse district, but Mrs. Moore can recall when a Syrian grocer lived in one house, a wealthy produce wholesaler in another, black teachers in another, all within pointing distance of her living room window.

In the 1940s Garnet High School was built, and black youngsters were bused in from throughout the Kanawha Valley. The school, which still stands across the street from Mrs. Moore's house, today is in use as an adult education center.

But at the time it operated as a black high school, Garnet was the center of Negro life in the state, according to Mrs. Moore. "There were public performances and the best lectures. Fine leaders from all over the United States became speakers for commencements," she said.

Mrs. Moore's stay in Charleston might not have been permanent had she not met and married another teacher, Bill Moore, a widower with a young daughter. Although Mrs. Moore had no children of her own, she and her husband raised his daughter and two boys.

"My husband taught biology at Garnet High School, and he was the head football coach. Everyone called him Chief," said Mrs. Moore, who always refers to her late husband as Bill. "He had a reputation, Bill Moore, maker of men. He had a fine mind, high ideals, was a perfect gentleman and a role model for the boys at Garnet. Bill had very little to say, but if you were around Bill Moore, you couldn't be a lazy boy. When he passed, you'd be surprised at the number of students who wanted to carry his body."

As for herself, Mrs. Moore said she was "just a teacher, teaching another group of Negro children." But she acknowledged that fifty years and more ago, the black teacher was more than just an instructor. Having reached the top of what the society of the day allowed, he or she was a positive role model for thousands of school children.

"The teacher represented the best in the Negro race, the best in values, in character and intelligence," Mrs. Moore said of those who taught her. But the description applies to her as well. "The Negro teacher was a model. If you weren't the right kind, you'd lose your job," she said.

The teachers had a ten-minute period in the morning during which they "instilled ideals," Mrs. Moore said. "We told the Negro children about their possibilities, things to avoid -- don't wear your feelings on your sleeve and become hotheads. We would tell them, you can be president if you have character, if you have values. The spirit of man changes the world, not color. And if you were in my classroom, you worked. That doesn't mean all my students were smart. But even the dullest student could achieve something."

The teachers reached out into the community, visiting each student's home at least one time a month and working with parents to make sure the child stayed on the right track.

But while the segregated school system remained peacefully in place in Charleston--at least on the surface -- a cry for equality and social justice and integration and civil rights had begun to echo across the land.

"It was a time of quick social change and some people lived in terror," Mrs. Moore said. "If you mistreat a people so badly for so long, you become afraid of them. They had built walls that came tumbling down."

One of the walls of separation crashed to the ground in 1954 when the United States Supreme Court ruled segregated schools illegal. Although many school districts resisted complying with the decision, Charleston's schools were integrated in 1955.

"The day of integration was one of the most peaceful in a complicated social situation," said Mrs. Moore, who was by that time a veteran teacher. "I don't mean there weren't quiet undercurrents. I'm sure some whites didn't want it and some Negroes. But, if anything, I think parents didn't want their children hurt or snubbed or abused.

"I think it's one of the healthiest things that happened to the community," she said. "I think one reason is that the white leadership was healthy, and when integration came, parents, the public, teachers and the press were ready for it. It was like drinking a nice cup of tea."

The change had its casualties. A number of black educators left the state rather than accept a demotion from principals' positions to teaching positions. And at that time, the county also lost the services of Josephine Moore, who had reached retirement age.

But although she left the public school system, Mrs. Moore didn't stay retired for very long. She was persuaded to take over the directorship of a kindergarten program at the YWCA. Later, she became the first black teacher at St. Anthony's Catholic School.

"I taught until I was 72," she said. "I don't think they've had a Negro teacher since at St. Anthony's. I went not to stay. A white friend asked if I would substitute until they could get a teacher. It was so nice I stayed three years until I was ready to retire again."

Teaching at St. Anthony's presented a new challenge in race relations for Mrs. Moore. "I remember one time when a little boy came up to my desk and asked, 'Mrs. Moore, are you a colored lady?' and I said, 'Why?' and he said, 'Let's forget it.' I think it was a good experience for them and good for me."

Mrs. Moore is convinced that relations between whites and blacks were never really bad in Charleston. "I think this valley was free of a lot of imaginary differences between people, even though we didn't go to the same churches or clubs," she said.

This was not to say that Mrs. Moore was spared the pain of racial prejudice. When she and her husband bought a house on what had been an all-white side of the street in their neighborhood, she was hurt when a white family bought the rest of the homes on the street to keep out other blacks.

Their white neighbors were never "mean or ugly," Mrs. Moore said. "They just didn't see you. They'd walk on the other side of the street. Do you know we're now good friends and I'm invited to their houses? People live in a world of myths, but they do change their attitudes."

Another incident that made Mrs. Moore "feel funny inside" occurred at a dinner at which community service awards were to be presented to a group of women, most of whom were white. "The man gave out the awards to Mrs. This and Mrs. That, and when he got to me, he just said, 'Josephine Moore.' I didn't move, and later people said they were sorry he embarrassed me. I said I wasn't as embarrassed as he was because I didn't accept the award.

"I don't know the answer to the race problem," she said in reflection. "I think it's silly. God wanted a beautiful flower garden of people. Hatreds are taught -- it doesn't have to be racial -- and they build up until they become explosive.

"If you hate me because I don't look like you, there's no way I can defend myself. You're a victim of your own prejudice. Prejudice is a creature of bad thinking. Good intelligent people don't live by it.

"I think the world is better, people are more tolerant and hatred is abating. But you make your own friends, you open your own doors. You can make the world a better place by what you do in your own little piece of it."

To her little corner of the world, Josephine Moore has brought peace and a softening of the human spirit.

Lorene Dillon Parsley

Guardian of a Legacy

When January wraps her icy fingers around the remote ridge above Big Laurel Creek, isolating the community from the rest of mountainous Mingo County in the southwestern corner of West Virginia, Lorene Parsley can be seen taking off in her jeep to deliver handmade quilts to families that need them.

She also may take along a coat or a sleeping bag she has fashioned from scrap material or a couple of quarts of beans she canned the previous summer from the surplus of a neighbor's garden.

"I've just always been a homemaker that believed in conserving everything," Lorene explains in the understated manner her neighbors have come to appreciate.

"Whatever crops up, I use it. And I don't do it from the standpoint of making money," she says. "I just do it from the standpoint of using what's going to waste -- what's going to go to somebody's garbage heap to be burned up. Then when I get that done, I'm always looking for who needs it the worst to keep warm."

But Lorene Parsley is much more than just a resourceful and generous housewife. This softspoken grandmother has been a moving force in a patchwork of her community's struggles for a better way of life.

She worked with her neighbors to get telephones and electrical service on the Ridge. And she threw her energy and resources into a campaign to establish a community-operated school at Big Laurel for children whose education was suffering because they couldn't get off the mountain in the winter to attend classes.

According to one neighbor, Lorene brings a vitality to every community effort in which she is involved and has been described as being at the heart of the community, "somehow managing to juggle her family, church and community interests with good humor and a characteristic directness that causes many folks to value her wisdom."

Lorene does not view the duties she takes on as work, primarily because she sees herself as the guardian of a legacy that includes church, community, family values and, perhaps most of all, the land that was entrusted to her care.

Lorene Dillon Parsley was born 64 years ago on the ridge at Big Laurel, the seventh of twelve children of parents descended from some of the first settlers to carve out homesteads in the rugged southern West Virginia terrain.

She went to the eighth grade at a one-room country school on the Ridge where students sat around a pot-bellied stove and carried water from a neighbor's spring. Closed as a part of a massive statewide consolidation program in the 1950s, the school provided just about all of the formal education received by Ridge residents of Lorene's generation.

"It never entered my mind it's being possible to go to a high school then," she said.

"I consider that I went to the eighth grade, but I think I went two years in the seventh," she said. "At that time there was a problem with books, and I remember them not having books when I got to the eighth grade."

With the option of higher education shut off to her, Lorene did what most of the young women in that part of rural West Virginia did when they finished school -- she got married.

Part of the price she paid for the marriage was leaving the Ridge. She was gone eight years, and during that time, she gave birth to three sons.

But when the boys were pretty good size, Lorene returned to the Ridge. "It's in my blood stream," she said emphatically. "The reason I stay now, it's not because I need to or have to. I just like it."

Her oldest son, an inspector for the state Department of Highways, also came back to the Ridge and built his home near the site of the two-story white frame farmhouse where Lorene's grandparents lived.

Her youngest son works as a machinist in neighboring Logan County and lives at the small community of Kirk, where he grew up.

The middle son, Ronnie, is the one who left. Ronnie lives in Mississippi, where he teaches eleventh grade history, drives a school bus and directs a church choir.

It was Ronnie who, together with his uncle and cousin, built the log cabin where Lorene now lives. Originally the home of Lorene's mother when it was built in the 1950s, the house is a monument to the spirit of cooperative effort in which Lorene so strongly believes.

"The biggest issue was that Ronnie wanted to do it," Lorene recalled. "My brother Claude lived on the home place then. He was idle right at that time and I had a jeep he wanted. So we agreed that he'd work it out building the cabin."

Lorene set up a cook camp at the family cemetary. "It wasn't on a barbecue thing; it was rocks fixed to gather wood and burn," she said. "And that was the way I cooked."

The family went into the woods and selected logs to be cut, which the men hauled to the site.

"And then everybody pitched in and got the bark peeled off of them. Then Claude and the boys proceeded to put the logs up," Lorene said. "From that we creosoted. Some would creosote while others would be agoin' on up with the roof. It was a team."

This sturdy house was home for seven months for teachers Gretchen Shaffer and Kathy O'Hagan when they first arrived at Big Laurel in 1976 to help make the community school a reality.

The school was one of the many visions of Edwina Pepper, a spritely, energetic woman who came to the Ridge in the 1940s with a pocketful of dreams she eagerly shared with her new neighbors.

Charmed by the mountain culture, the traces of Elizabethan English in the language, the enduring loyalty to family and tradition, Ed Pepper committed her life to keeping the culture known and thriving.

She was a moving force in establishing a magazine which told of that culture. She struggled to put the land she had acquired into a perpetual trust so that people could homestead it and artists could live and be creative. She sought the establishment of a community-run school where the mountain culture would be treasured instead of ridiculed.

Lorene Parsley quickly fell under the spell of the dynamic and articulate stranger who had adopted her community.

"It used to be everybody farmed and they'd have corn-hoeings and bean-stringings and all that kind of stuff, but we didn't know what community action was," she said.

"When Ms. Pepper came along, she started dreaming about having electricity in here and telephones and a school on top of the Ridge and a church and all that," Lorene said. "Of course, we used to think it was a big joke. But I've lived to see it all except the church come to pass, you know. It's people working together."

And people working together creates the energy that makes the Big Laurel community almost unique among small, remote mountain villages.

"I was telling my sister-in-law what I was involved with here, and she says, 'There's more things that goes on out there than in the valley,' and she was wishing she was out here," Lorene chuckled.

"And I said, 'Yeah, everybody gets involved in everything that's going on and takes a part. There's not many communities that function the way this one does," she said.

Just as Edwina Pepper influenced and inspired Lorene, so Lorene has been an inspiration to many of her neighbors and friends, including Gretchen Shaffer.

"Lorene is a paradox. She's at once a typical mountain woman and yet not typical,"

said Gretchen, a Roman Catholic sister who has spent almost a decade teaching the youngsters at Big Laurel School.

"Like many of her neighbors, she is resourceful and independent. She does, however, go against the trend of women in her generation by driving her own jeep where she wants to, wearing her hair short when it suits her and assuming positions of leadership," Gretchen said.

And although she is "steeped in the traditions and folklore of the area, she maintains a broad global view," according to Gretchen.

Lorene was one of the initiators of a proposal that the Big Laurel community sponsor two Cuban refugee families being held in a government detention center in this country. She also supported a communitywide collection of money for the starving people of Ethiopia.

She is treasurer for the John A. Sheppard Memorial Ecological Reservation, the community land trust established by Edwina Pepper in 1985 which Lorene hopes will protect the land and provide a haven for her grandchildren or their children if they ever need it.

"I think it helped me through life by being well-acquainted with hardship from the start," she said. "Now that has never happened to my grandchildren, and I hope it never does because none of them are prepared for it.

"But the way I'm trying to proceed in my affairs is what little we have here, what we have preserved and are still trying to preserve -- keep away from coal companies, keeping it secure in case some of them would see fit or have to come back to it."

Lorene is keeping a watchful eye on her grandchildren to see which of them is best equipped to inherit the family legacy and trust.

"My parents observed the whole dozen of us, the dirty dozen, and they decided I was the one that would pay the taxes and follow through with our agreement, their wishes for the home place in the future," she said.

"That's why I'm here. It would always have been in my blood and in my system, but if my parents hadn't of figured this all out and entrusted it to me, chances are I'd have let something else influence me, or somebody else influence me and go in another direction," she said.

"My dream is that some of mine will choose to come back home."

Connie Talbot

Catching a Dream

Connie Talbot once held a large piece of the American Dream firmly in her grasp -- a comfortable suburban home, two cars, a motorcycle and room after room of fashionable new furniture.

She traded it all in for her two sons and a gritty, stubborn belief in herself that is propelling her toward a life of self-sufficiency on her own terms.

The second of five children, Connie was born 45 years ago into a family that "didn't have a lot of money, but we had a lot of love."

Home was a three-room house at Coal Branch Heights, an area which has been described as a hilltop hollow much like those of rural southern West Virginia. The difference is that Coal Branch Heights lies entirely within the city limits of Charleston, the state capitol.

"Everybody slept in the same bedroom," Connie said. "We had three beds in one room."

Her mother took in ironing from the teachers at the two-room Airport School which Connie attended.

"I sort of arranged for mom to do the ironing for the teachers," Connie said. "I wanted to go to school so bad when I was five, I told them I was six. The teacher found out that I was there so I had to stay an extra year. But I was always the teachers' pet, and they took me home with them."

Connie's father worked at truck loading docks and later became a truck driver. But times were very hard and the family had to struggle to survive.

"Sometimes we didn't have very much food, but my parents would make sure we were fed even though they may not have had supper or dinner," she said. "They would do without to make sure we had. Sometimes our gas would be cut off, and they made it a fun time, like camping out. We'd cook outside, and we thought it was just a lot of fun camping out when really there was no money for gas."

When she was a little older, her father started rebuilding another home he had bought from her grandfather. "But I didn't get to live there -- I got married and left," Connie said.

She was married at the age of 14 to the son of her mother's best friend.

"My mother's friend's husband did shift work at Carbide, and I stayed with her when he worked the midnight shift," Connie said. "They weren't like us, they were middle class. They had a brick home and Jimmy was their only child. We just got together. He was 19, had everything he wanted and was spoiled. I just fell in love with him."

Connie's first daughter, Sherie, was born when she was 15, followed by Robin two years later, Penny after four more years and Brenda two years after Penny.

Those were difficult years. Connie had learned that her young husband had a serious drinking problem and didn't like to work. "His father kept us," she said. "We stayed with his parents. I had married a child."

Then when Jimmy went to New Jersey to find work, he met someone else.

"I went wild at that point," Connie said. "I thought, he's doing this, I'll go out and party. I still stayed with his parents. My mother-in-law and I are real close."

But Connie wasn't sure what to do. Just into her twenties, husbandless, with four young daughters and no marketable skills, she got a job at the Athletic Club, a popular Charleston "key club" that sold liquor by the drink to its card-carrying members.

"I had to wear bunny outfits and everything," Connie said. "It was the first time I'd really been in the city. We'd go shopping, but it was the first time I really got out to see how things were moving around."

It was at the Athletic Club that Connie met Ed, a trouble-shooter for a major corporation based in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

"I knew him for two weeks and he called and asked me to marry him," Connie said. "I was tired and thought, 'So what if you don't love him, marry him.' On our wedding night we drove to Louisiana."

It was a whole different world from the close-knit society she had left. Connie's daughters came to live with her, but were so unhappy she let them go back home to live with their grandparents.

"It was a bad time," Connie said. "I was crying all the time. There were a lot of telephone calls. Ed traveled all over the United States so I was left by myself really. We lived in Louisiana State University apartments, and it seemed like people were so unfriendly. I guess they were so busy, but I had nobody to talk to."

Things got a little better when Connie and Ed bought a house and she started making friends with her new neighbors. She had a son, Marty, followed ten years later by Jonathan, whom she calls "my little gift from God."

After Marty started to school, Connie grew increasingly restless. She went to work at a fast food restaurant, and later worked for a seamstress. She liked the work but quit because the woman "didn't want to pay her help."

"We didn't need the money, and I should have gone to school," she said. "You just

never can tell what's going to happen. I tell women they should go to school when they have a chance and they should get credit put in their names, too."

Every year Connie and her sons came home to West Virginia and stayed two or three months. Every year it got harder to leave. "We got here and didn't want to go back."

Meanwhile, her marriage began to unravel. "We had everything, a brick home, two cars, a motorcycle and new furniture, but I still wasn't happy," Connie said. "He treated me like I was a child. He was the boss and he never let me make any decisions."

Things came to a head the summer Connie convinced her sister and her children to come to Baton Rouge for a visit. "I had told them if they came down, I'd drive them home," she said. "After they got down, he decided I couldn't drive them back. That's the way it was. I had almost no communication with him.

"This time I decided I was going to stand up. We didn't pack many clothes because I really didn't intend staying in West Virginia, but then he made such a fuss, I decided not to go back."

She had been back in Charleston two or three months when Ed called, saying he wanted to see the boys.

"I thought he was calling from Louisiana, but he was calling from somewhere on the road and he was coming to get them. He took both boys, both of them crying, and he wanted me to go back. He said, 'If you want your children, get back in the car and follow us,' but I didn't," Connie said.

"I was so upset, I went outside and thought, 'How am I going to do this?' So I decided to let him get home with them and then I called and pretended I was coming back. I was real lovey-dovey, knowing I was going to pick the boys up," she said.

When she arrived in Louisiana, Connie found that Ed was on the road and the boys were staying with his parents.

"I had dinner with them and said I wanted to go home before traffic got bad, but they said Ed said I couldn't take them yet, they had to see their uncle," she said. "I had to stay there three days pretending everything was all right.

"Finally, I got the kids in the car and told them we were going home to West Virginia. Marty's grandmother had talked to him and said, 'If your mother tries to take you back, call the police and give them your license number.' He was pulled in two directions. It's a lot to put on a 13-year-old.

"We went to the house to get the boys' clothing, real nervous, not knowing when Ed was coming in. We got only what we could put in paper bags," Connie said. "We got in the car and that's when I decided to get my divorce, right then."

The next few months were a frightening time. Hearing that her husband had an all-points bulletin issued for them, Connie hid out with the children at a friend's house for two months. Then she filed for divorce with a legal services organization.

"We had gone from having everything we needed to having nothing," she said. "Sometimes you feel like you're trapped in a box, the stress is so bad."

A friend called and offered Connie a job selling supplies for mobile homes, which she did for several months until the business closed. After that, she started to work as a waitress at a downtown restaurant, a job she found increasingly difficult to do.

"It was just too much," she said. "I was going to church and at that place, they served drinks. It just wasn't my thing anymore."

Then, when things weren't looking very optimistic, Connie was asked if she was interested in helping develop a sewing cooperative to be located behind Covenant House, a day shelter for the homeless in Charleston.

She attended meetings with other women who wanted to work in the co-op, together with representatives of agencies which were supporting the project.

The women worked long hours exploring funding sources, attending workshops to learn how other co-ops worked and planning how the sewing co-op could become self-sufficient.

"I think having God in my life has helped," Connie said of that long period when she didn't know where her life was headed. "You can always turn to Him. I think that's what brought me through. Also, we still have love in our family. I have a great relationship with my girls, and they're close to each other. Everybody wants to help everybody."

She also has great pride in her sons. "Marty is a great athlete and an honor student. Hopefully, he will get an athletic scholarship to college. Jonathan idolizes Marty, and he's such a comfort to me."

As she gets back on her feet, Connie has found herself reaching out in new directions and being public about things she once would have kept to herself. She testified poignantly at legislative hearings on the plight of women like herself, who, by circumstance, find themselves struggling to keep their families together as they work their way off welfare rolls.

"Many of you are parents who have concerns for your children," she told House members. "You want them to be happy. I do, too. You want them to be warm in winter months, to be properly clothed, to have a good education and health care if they need it. I do, too. You want them to be able to have fun in school, to participate in sports and other activities so that they are accepted by their peers and do not feel isolated and different. So do I."

The sewing co-op has offered a new kind of challenge for Connie. Again, she is reaching out to recapture a piece of the American Dream, but this time, instead of hanging her hopes entirely on someone else, she is using her own skills and struggling with like-minded women to make a success of the cooperative venture.

"I think the co-op is getting on its feet. We do quality work and hope to get repeat contracts," she said.

"I've found that I have confidence in myself, my talent and my skills. If the co-op grows, it will be my business along with the other women."

Hazel Allen

A Helping Hand

It was in the mountainous countryside of Bell County, Kentucky, near where she now runs a thrift store, that Hazel Allen learned the lessons that would help her survive a life of hardship and economic uncertainty.

Her resourceful father and mother taught Hazel to grow and can her own food, to manage her money well, to pay her debts and to share what she did have with those less fortunate than herself.

"I was born in 1920 in a mining camp, but when I was young we moved to Canadatown, about ten miles out of Williamsburg, so that my dad could do farming in the summers and do mining work in the winters," Hazel said.

"There were three boys and four girls, and we lived in a two-room log house," she said. "Every fall when it would get late, my dad would pack us in a wagon and go back to Morley, Tennessee. We lived in a mining camp there. Then, when spring came, my daddy was laid off and we would come back here to raise a crop.

"We raised a lot of corn, potatoes and watermelons, and even took our corn to the mill to be ground. There were many blackberries near us, and I remember canning as much as 600 jars of blackberries one summer to tide us over the winters," she said.

"We had it rough with that many in the family -- nine of us all total. There was no welfare then, but we had the incentive and motivation to be resourceful and self-supportive."

A large part of the responsibility for the family fell onto Hazel's shoulders when

she was still very young. "There were so many little children underneath me, and there was no work, and I went to work for families around here for a dollar for a half a week's work. The little children had to have shoes to go to school. I went to sixth grade in school, so what education I got I got out in this big old world," she said.

When she was 17, Hazel left her Kentucky home and went to Illinois where she supported herself as a waitress and endured two unhappy marriages.

"My first husband was a barber and a tatoo-artist, but he died of a heart attack. My second husband turned out to be an alcoholic," Hazel said. "That marriage didn't work out, and the reason I was unhappy was that I didn't think men treated women like they should be treated.

"I would hold down two eight-hour jobs and thought nothing about it because I believed in work," she said. "I was a waitress in high-class places. I went for the best, and I would hold an eight-hour share and go to another place and another eight hours, and I didn't think anything about it."

But she was away from Kentucky for 29 years, and in all that time not a day passed that Hazel didn't wish she could go home.

"That's just one of them things that happens, you know. 'I am going home one of these days,' I kept telling myself, 'I'm going home one of these days.' When you're raised in an area, it's home to you, it really is. I didn't aggravate anybody with it because it was just one of those things that I would just work until the time came to come home."

When the time came to return to the land of her childhood, so carefully protected in her memory, Hazel worried that she would no longer fit into the culture she had left so long ago. But her fears quickly disappeared when she was given a warm welcome from old friends, neighbors and relatives.

But time and distance gave her new insight into her old community. Everywhere she looked, Hazel saw a lot of need. Never one to sit around and watch when there was work to be done, the self-reliant Hazel rolled up her sleeves to help where she could.

"There were so many people who didn't know how to go at anything or what to do, and they didn't have drivers' licenses," she said. "I drove them all over this country to get their VA checks started and stuff like that. I drove them from here to Lexington-- I don't know, family after family -- to get their SSI started, black lung started, their food stamps started."

Hazel adopted a more self-sufficient way of life herself as she again grew vegetables and herbs and stored food for the winter as her parents had taught her.

"I made up my mind to stay, and after a couple more bad marriages, I decided to live by myself in a trailer on some land my family had in Canadatown and take in those who needed a temporary place to stay," she said.

Hazel started to work at the Friendship Center, run by Catholic sisters in Williamsburg. There she cooked and sorted clothes and helped families who needed the same kind of assistance as those she had aided in Canadatown. She took food from her garden to cook for the workers and the hungry people who came through the doors of the center.

But while she worked at the Friendship Center, Hazel dreamed of having her own thrift store and hospitality center near her home where she knew the need was great.

"Sister Sally, who was then doing volunteer work at the Friendship Center, en-

couraged me to talk my dream over with Sister Noel LeClaire, the one in charge at that time," Hazel remembered. "Soon I was renting and fixing up an old farmhouse on a beautiful hill off of Highway 204. The sisters and many other friends, relatives and neighbors contributed to starting Hazel's Helping Hand store."

When the store first opened, Hazel sold furniture, clothes, household items and sometimes produce. Today women in the area who make crafts bring their dolls, quilts and pillows to Hazel, who sells them without taking a commission.

"When Sister Noel put me out here she said, 'Hazel, you are going to a needy area, you are going home. I don't want you to charge over a quarter apiece unless it's extra special nice, like a formal.' I can get a dollar for that, but just ordinary clothes, I get a quarter whether it's new or not. If they haven't got the money, I give it to them," Hazel said.

"I need my people and my people need me," she said. "I've said I will always try to stay with it. You should see their eyes whenever they come in here. One little girl came in here and I just spread a tablecloth out and you ought to have heard that girl. She had a little boy and a little girl and she's not over 17. She said, 'I have never seen such beautiful clothes in my life,' and she just went on and on."

Hazel offered rooms in the back of the store to Sister Sally to set up the Rainbow Circle of Children, a creative pre-school program for youngsters two to five years old. Another sister used the enclosed back porch to tutor individuals or small groups of adults for their GEDs.

Some folks come by just to have someone to talk to, and Hazel responds with a hot cup of coffee and a listening ear. Sometimes she's able to offer some advice as to where they might go to find help for their problems.

"I had one little girl to call me this morning. This will be her eighth child she's having. She's having her kitchen rebuilt -- she's hired somebody, she's given them a little piece of land to do her kitchen -- and the foundation fell out from under it," Hazel said.

"She said, 'One of my children fell down through the floor of it and cut his chin and it was $85. I ain't got that kind of money. They didn't want to sew it up until I got $20.'

"She called me crying on my shoulder, and I said, 'We will see what we can do about getting you a medical card for those children.' Your children need them as much as your women do who are pregnant, I think, because if there's no jobs, how are we going to pay those medical bills?

"At one point I heard her say to the little boy, 'Did you give that baby more sweetened water?' Course I was bold enough, I asked, 'What are you giving the baby sweetened water for?' And she said, 'We are out of milk.' I have gone a couple of times or maybe three or four times to that woman and bought milk because she had that little child and she needed it."

People in the Canadatown area know to come to Hazel when their children need school clothes or shoes. "If they don't have any spending money, I just give them what they need, and little children never leave my place without a toy, a piece of candy or a book. I was always poor myself and know what it's like as a youngster to go without shoes," she said.

"One little old kid will call me -- he's about 18 or 19 and there's no work in the area, and he'll say, 'Hazel, my britches are wore out,'" she said. "I'll say, 'Come on in and hunt you a pair, I don't have time to,' and he comes and hunts him a couple pairs of

pants and a couple of shirts. And he'll say, 'I'll pay you one of these days.' I'll say, 'Yeah, you will whenever you get a job. I know you will,' and I just kinda laugh and let him go on."

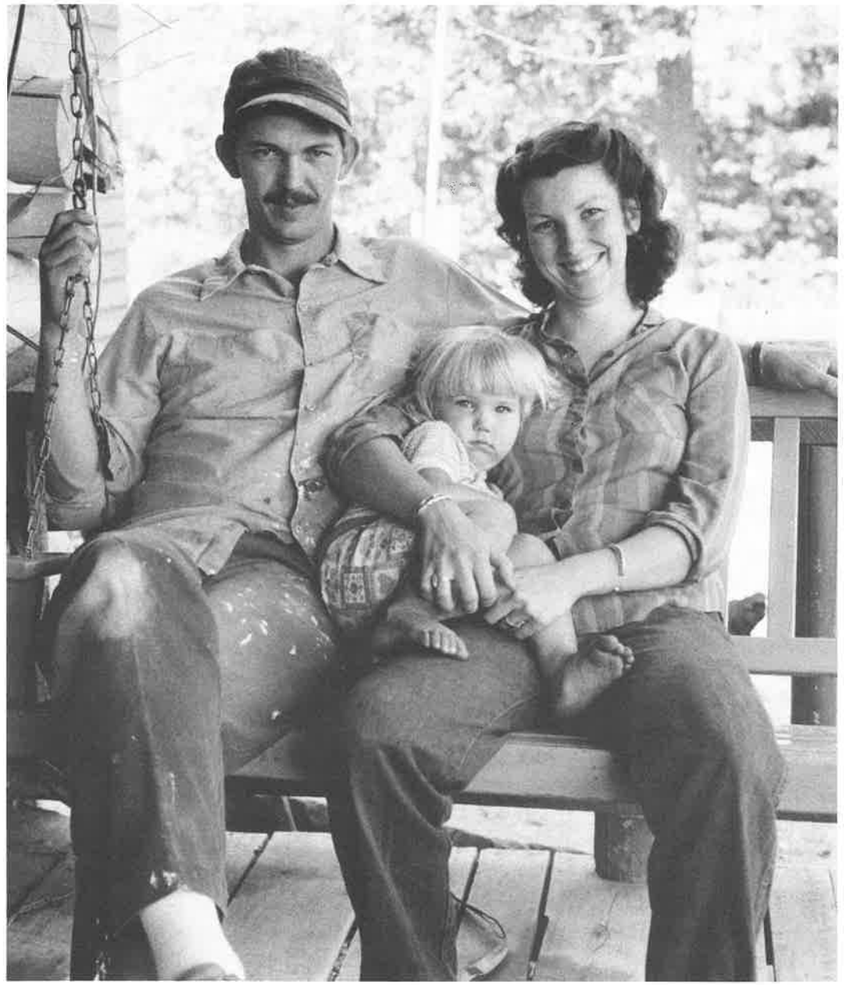
Hazel says religion has always played an important role in her life, but her religion is not of the fire-and-brimstone type she has heard about from local preachers since she was a child.

"I don't go along with them on a lot of the stuff that they do on our religion, about your hair has to be long and your dress has got to be long and no pants," she said.

"It's not what we got, it's not our old rags nor our hair that's gonna get us to heaven, it's what's in our hearts," she said. "I think what life's about is helping each other.

"My home is always a hospitality center and a refuge for young men and women to stay as long as they need to. I've helped quite a few to get on their own feet and use their own talents and gifts. I give them room and good meals, and they usually help me in my store or around the land.

"Nearly every day someone tells me how much they appreciate my being here with this service," Hazel said. "And it absolutely helps me to help others. It's good to be needed and wanted."



Pauline Johnson Sturgill

A Shining Hope

Although she spent her childhood under the big skies of the Colorado plains, Pauline Johnson Sturgill has found her home in a unique and remote mountain ridge community in Mingo County in southern West Virginia.

The accent is different, the life experiences dissimilar, and yet this 26-year-old mother of four has become such a vital part of the Big Laurel community that at the age of 19, she was elected president of the spirited Big Laurel citizen group that has,

among other things, operated a community school for the past ten years. Just last year, she became the first president of the community's newly-formed land trust.

Pauline is seen by some observers as the spiritual heir apparent of her great-aunt, the legendary Edwina Pepper, whose broad vision of what a community can be has been Big Laurel's guiding light for more than a half century.

Today, thanks in large part to her efforts, the community boasts the Big Laurel School, a community woodshop and craft center and the land trust, which will enable people who live on the land to homestead and work creatively to maintain the positive elements of the family-based culture.

The community is fortunate that Pauline, also a woman of vision and strength, has come of age at a time when Ed Pepper, now in her mid-nineties and in failing health, has had to turn over leadership to a new generation.

Pauline did not always feel such a deep bond with her adopted land. In fact, as a 15-year-old western transplant, she could find little in her life that harmonized with the steep and craggy ridge above Marrowbone where survival was a constant struggle and creature comforts a foreign concept.

"I hated it. Honest to goodness, I hated it," she says. "I was used to spending my evenings and weekends with friends and buddies in game rooms and just having a lot of fun. Our high schools were just gargantuan. I thought this place was just nothing and hated it. Very isolated and no opportunities to go anywhere."

The oldest of three daughters, Pauline has always had a close relationship with her sister, Suzie, a year and a half younger. The youngest sister, Shawnee, several years younger, was "our little doll who followed us around," Pauline remembers.

"My dad, my earliest vision of him is working all night as a free-lance artist, striping and sign-painting and article-writing, which has paid off now because he is real successful," she says.

"Mom was just always a mom for the most part," she says. "Seems like late grade school, maybe sixth grade on into junior high, she worked, and so I was responsible for seeing that dinner was done, straightening the house and watching the two smaller sisters, who could pretty well watch themselves. But, you know, somebody was in charge. I was a lot more responsible."

When her parents were divorced, Pauline and her mother and sisters left Colorado, spending almost a year in Oklahoma. "That was a good process in that we stayed a short time, but it kind of weaned us away from our whole lifestyle that we were used to. We were still close enough that we went and saw my dad, and we lived close to his mother, our grandma," she says.

But the persuasive Ed Pepper kept urging the family to come to Mingo County to be part of the cooperative community she dreamed of on the mountain. That move occurred when Pauline was 15.

It was a different world. Not only did Pauline and her sisters feel deprived of activities they had enjoyed in Colorado, they also felt cut off from girl friends their own ages.

"There was just one girl in the whole, entire community," Pauline recalls. "She was Suzie's age. I was actually two years older than her. But because she was the only girl, we kind of clung to her. She didn't know anything about our lifestyle, she was so sheltered from living up this holler.

"We begged her mother for weeks just to let her stay all night with us at Ed's, and

that was the first time she had ever seen a shower. We just broadened her scope, so that I think her mother subconsciously blames Suzie and me for her ever leaving Marrowbone Creek."

School presented difficulties as well. "I started school in Kermit that winter and couldn't understand my teachers because the accent was so strong. But I was still two years ahead of everybody. It was really easy just to look at the books and make straight A's when I was a C-average student," she says.

The courtship process on the ridge also was foreign to Pauline, who shakes her head with bewilderment as she recalls how she got to know Kenneth Sturgill, the darkly handsome son of a neighboring family.

"Suzie and I being teenagers living up on the ridge, every boy in Mingo County seemed like would come up every weekend," she says.

"And it'd just drive Ed crazy. It was months, seems like, and Kenneth started finally easing in, and he'd stand around with the rest of them, and they'd stand around, and they'd all ignore us, and, gosh, we tried to ignore them," she laughs.

"But it got to where it was just him coming, and Suzie used to tease me that he'd run them all off so it was just him coming."

Then one day Kenneth, who was working on a logging job, stopped and picked up members of his family who had gotten off a bus only to have Pauline, Suzie and Shawnee jump on the back of his truck.

"That was the first time we both really saw each other," Pauline recalls. "And he's got this cap on him -- his parents used to keep his hair all cut off -- and he had this big chew of tobacco. And I thought, that's the ugliest man I ever saw. So that was my first real view of him. But then after that, I got to know him. He was just the kindest person and a gentleman. His whole family is like that."

Not long after that meeting, Pauline dropped out of school after completing her sophomore year and married Ken, who already had quit school.

Together they built a log home with a view overlooking a valley on a 10-acre parcel of land that had been in the Sturgill family for more than 120 years. They have continued to add onto the house as they have been able, but theirs still is a rugged existence, particularly for a mother of young children, since the house lacks a bathroom and until recently had no hot running water.

But Pauline is philosophical about the hardship, as well as the fact that two of her four daughters were born at home under less than ideal conditions. The second oldest, Sarah, was delivered with only Ken assisting on a cold winter night when the community midwife was delayed by ice and snow. Jessica and Alivia were born under less traumatic circumstances, but the last child, April, was delivered by one of the teachers at the school, again because there was no choice.

"I'm not dissatisfied," Pauline says when asked if she feels life has handed her a good turn. "I wish some days that the kids would all go to sleep for four hours and let me get something I'd like to do done. But, no, I can't think of anything I'd rather be doing at this point in my life."

Since her marriage, Pauline also has helped Ken with his work, something she has since learned is a rarity in the area.

"The woman's place is in the home so much around here," she says. "And my dad, he raised us girls not to take anything from any man and to pursue our lives. In a lot of ways, I thought I was a disappointment to him when I did get married, but he

saw that it was the right move and he's happy in it.

"When Kenneth and I got married, he was propping (cutting trees to prop mine roofs). And I'd go out every day and help him prop. And his mother and sister sat back and watched that, amazed, you know, 'til one day they went out and helped Clel (Pauline's father-in-law). Just the one day they went out and helped, I think that was an eye-opener," she says.

Several years ago, Pauline helped Ken open a garage to repair cars. They wanted to run the business on the ridge, but found it necessary to move down to the creek to be more accessible. The move has meant that Pauline can no longer help out as much in the garage, although she still does the bookkeeping work.

A friend has described Ken as "hard-working and self-taught, a wonderful husband and father."

There is little he cannot do, the friend observed. In addition to the garage, he works with his father and brothers logging and running a small sawmill.

"Ken has changed a lot because of his relationship with Pauline, who has been both strong and gentle in her demands," the friend said. "She has broken the stereotypes of the area by getting her GED, by working with Ken, by holding leadership roles, by being vocal in public, by learning to drive. But all this has happened slowly."

Pauline says she has not felt the pressure of being thrust into roles of leadership and responsibility at a young age.

"It doesn't bother me, honest to goodness," she says. "I turned 26 on my last birthday, and my big joke was that I was finally old enough to be a mother. Sitting here with four kids, I finally felt old enough to be a mother. And it doesn't bother me that at 19 I was elected president of Big Laurel Citizens. At that time I thought I was capable."

Pauline has been a central figure in the development of the John A. Sheppard Memorial Ecological Reservation, the land trust named by Edwina Pepper for her father, who owned the land in the early part of this century.

To protect the ridge from strip mining, Ms. Pepper had hoped to lease the land to families who would commit themselves to its care and who would contribute to the development of an interdependent community. In the last few years, when it became apparent that the good-will leasing would not provide strong enough protection for the land in the event of Ms. Pepper's death, the trust was established and Pauline was unanimously elected its president.

"I'd like this place to be here when my kids are old enough that if they want a home here, they can have a home here," she says of her hopes for the community. "But I want it better than it is now. If Jessica wants to go be a doctor, I want her to be able to come back and have a practice here. I think we've got a good thing going, but we've got a long ways to go. I think if we work hard at it and keep an eye open to opportunities, we could be a model for other communities."

As she shoulders more and more responsibility for the future of Big Laurel, Pauline increasingly is stepping into Ed Pepper's shoes as the visionary who will keep alive the dream of a better community for the children of Big Laurel School and their children after that.

A friend said of her, "Her keenness to make connections, her desire to leave the world a better place than she found it, her generous gift of time keep her from being housebound. She's a shining hope for two generations -- the one before hers and the one after."

Beth Spence

Weaver of Words and Deeds

After Beth had completed writing the stories in this booklet, the Task Force members decided that her story too should be shared. What follows is the transcript of an interview in her home, a log house that sits high on a hilltop in Alum Creek, West Virginia.

Interviewer (I): Having written the stories of these other women, Beth, where would you start your own?
Beth (B): I'd start my story when I was in the second grade in Logan County in the middle of the 1950s, the middle of a coal bust. The mines were being mechanized and everybody was being thrown out of work. Kids were coming to school barefoot, and it was just really a bad, bad time for almost everybody. There was an upper class, but it was really small. Almost everybody was suffering. Families were being uprooted and moving away. Schools were terribly overcrowded. Teachers were teaching by permit. They didn't have the credits they actually needed to be certified. I remember my second grade class was just packed. They had those little desks that were screwed down to the floor, with the inkwells in the corner. In addition to those desks they brought in others -- one row by the windows, one row by the chalkboard, and two rows across the back so that you couldn't do any kind of activities that involved standing up or moving around.

My recollection is that there were forty-six children in the classroom, and the teacher was sick a lot that year. There were a couple of kids who came to school who didn't have anything. The one that stands out in my mind is the little boy who came to school

one day barefoot. It was late fall and it was real cool. The teacher pulled him up to the front of the room and said, "I want to know how come you aren't wearing your shoes to school. Explain this to me." He said, "Well, teacher, it's like this." He talked to her just like that. He sort of drew himself up and said, "We only had one pair of shoes at the house this morning, and my little brother's in the first grade so I let him wear them 'cuz it was more important to him."

I guess it was that time when I started trying to figure out why kids had to come to school barefoot, and people had to wear hair nets to get a school lunch. You had to work for them; you didn't get them free and kids worked in the cafeteria.

It was this that I think really brought home to me that there is a lot of unfairness in life. There were children who came to school in feed sacks and other kinds of rags, totally inadequate clothes, not enough coats. I didn't put it together with anything else. I just thought it was unfair, and I didn't understand it. It wasn't until a whole lot later that things came together, but that was the year I started thinking about things.

I: What was it that made things come together for you?
B: It was probably the war in Vietnam and the discussion that was going on at college campuses about the war; and the fact that of my classmates it was the kids who had come to school barefoot and sat in the back of the room who were in Vietnam dying. You could make a list of the kids from Logan County, and it was the poor kids, the kids who didn't have a chance to go to college that were going to war right and left.

That was one giant connection for me: the kids with no shoes and the war in Vietnam. They never had a chance; they never had any real options. The path was set from the time they were put in the back row of the first grade without any shoes on. It wasn't their fault that their daddies got thrown out of work. It wasn't their fault that they never had a chance to go to college. And it certainly had nothing to do with their minds. Given the chances that some of the rest of us had, they might have done even better.

I: How did you come to choose involvement in social concerns issues?
B: It's really hard to figure all that out. I grew up in the back of a print shop. My daddy was a job printer. He had a little weekly newspaper and he was really involved in the community and in what was going on. I trailed along with him a lot, sort of got to see a lot of things that other kids didn't get to see right there in my own community. Then it was getting out and going to school. I went to Ohio University and then to Marshall. I got involved in the anti-war movement. Then when I came back to Logan County, almost as soon as I got there the Buffalo Creek disaster happened. I had been involved a little in political campaigns -- in Bobby Kennedy's campaign for the presidency, in Bobby Nelson's first election to the state senate in West Virginia. I'd been on the outside of Jock Yablonski's campaign to reform the United Mine Workers. I knew a lot of what he was saying was correct about the leadership of the union being corrupt and the need for new leadership. Seemed like it all fit together: kids in bad circumstances, an area where miners were used as machines,but they didn't have any control over their lives, over their communities, over their land.

The ultimate piece happened when I came back to Logan County to help my dad run the newspaper. The month after I returned Buffalo Creek was washed away. I think that's when I really got involved for the first time that deeply in what happened to a community. I didn't know many people up there when it happened; I got to know

people afterwards. I spent hours and hours up there just doing whatever I could to help people get through that awful time; trying to help people articulate their concerns and to help people rebuild their lives their way, not the way the governor said the community should be rebuilt, not the way all the planners said. It was really difficult for the people to get input; in most ways people who were fighting for that kind of right were not listened to, and a lot of people were just too hurt to fight. Everybody had lost someone; there were a hundred and twenty-five killed. A whole string of communities was just totally washed out. If you weren't dead your neighbor probably was. Everybody had terrible horror stories. The people who survived had climbed mountains and grabbed onto sticks and pulled themselves up. But when it came right down to it they had no control. I still get mad about Buffalo Creek. I get real mad because I think that not only was there a disaster of negligence on the part of the corporation that I think committed murder, but it was premeditated murder because an unsafe gob pile sat there with water backed up behind it for years. For years and years people warned and nothing was done about it. So that's why I think it was premeditated murder. At best there was no concern for the people who lived there.

Then the second disaster was the way people were not allowed to have any voice in the rebuilding of the community. There were all kinds of grandiose plans and none of them ever came about. If you go to Buffalo Creek today you are struck because there's this big road a lot wider than the one that went through there before the flood, and the road goes up to the coal mines at the head of the creek. Along that road are houses which are in some ways no better than the houses that were destroyed. Some people have rebuilt homes and they're nice, but what was envisioned was some sort of "model community." And that hasn't happened. The original idea got boiled down to three apartment complexes which people said again and again they didn't want. They wanted a little house like they'd had before. They wanted to have a yard, a place where kids could play, where they could raise gardens. Instead they got these apartments that look like motels because they're one floor. That was the government's compromise: they wouldn't put them in high rises. But they're just as close together. There have been severe sewer problems since the day they were built. They're thin-walled. It's just not the kind of life people lived and it's certainly not the promise that was made about the rebuilding of housing in the community.

And then I came to Mingo County just before the flood and saw the same kinds of things happening and the same kinds of concerns raised about putting people ahead of the exploitation of the land; putting people ahead of absentee corporate land owners who don't pay taxes or pay miniscule taxes on hundreds and thousands of acres of land. Proof again and again that those folks didn't care about the people who lived in Mingo County, folks who had been washed out, who needed a little patch of land to try to rebuild their lives.

Now how all that has made me who I am I don't know. But these are some of the major things.

I: You speak often of the land. What does the land mean for you?

B: I think the land should belong to the people who live on it. I believe there is something morally and ethically wrong with the way this land was gotten in the first place. It was stolen in some cases; in some cases people were paid peanuts for it with the belief that no one would ever come in and put a strip mine in the back yard or dig a deep mine behind the house. I think it is wrong for people to hold land for speculative reasons when people who have a history in the community have no place to live and are forced onto creek banks and river banks where the flooding has happened before and will happen again. And people can't do anything about it since so much of the land is corporately owned. As one land owner said to me, "None of our land is for sale." This is certainly true in Mingo County where corporate land owners fought tooth and nail not to have their land taken for housing. They believed they had the right to hold onto land, and the people who lived in Mingo County and worked in Mingo County and made money for them had no right to own the land, to live on the land, and to call it their own without fear of someone digging out the back yard or saying the time has come to put in a mine and it is no longer convenient for them to live there.

It happened in the coal camps, too. Pittston said, "We need to build a coal tipple, a big one," so they moved a whole community of people out and told them to find housing where they could. This was in Logan County and there was no place to go. The companies had been tearing down old company housing as people moved out because it wasn't profitable to rent; it was more profitable to rent the land and let people put in a trailer. They claimed that they helped people find housing but they didn't help anyone find anything. People found what they could and it was often miles and miles from the community where they had lived. It wasn't what they wanted but they had no voice. It was convenient for them to live there when the mine was working; they were sort of a captive work force. They could buy at the company store; they could keep money right in the community. It was convenient to have a house for them. It wasn't convenient when those companies weren't mining after big conglomerates bought them.

I: What are some of the things you're doing now, and what are some of your dreams for the future?

B: One of the things I am doing now is some work in housing. We're looking at homelessness in rural areas. We believe that people who are living in totally inadequate housing are homeless, not just people who have absolutely no place to call home. Some of the places we have looked at are really no better than having no roof over your head. The roofs leak, the walls are pasteboard, they're dark, they're damp, they invite sickness. I've done a series of interviews with people in Clay County and in Lincoln County and we're trying to show the connections between bad housing and health issues -- an amazing number of these people have terrible illnesses -- and with school failure. These are the people whose children are failing in school and condemning another generation to the same sort of substandard living conditions. And unemployment. Almost everyone we talked to had been unemployed for at least three years with little hope for finding work unless somehow jobs are created.

I'm told by officials in Lincoln County that housing is much better now than it was in the sixties, and I'm really surprised by that. From what I've seen people are living in horrible places. Whole families are living in camper trailers, in sheds, a family of eleven is living in a five-room house right on top of each other. I'm struck that for all the attention paid to Appalachia since the sixties very little has happened in the rural areas. You see little inroads here and there. You see a woman who as a child was not well cared for, and now she has children of her own who can but she takes good care of her kids, good care of her home; she has great pride in them. You see something like that and you think things are better, and they are in some ways. School lunches are certainly better than kids wearing hair nets to get fed; school breakfasts are a good thing, too, in terms of starting kids off with a full stomach at the beginning of the day.

But by and large the condition of powerlessness, which is what it's all about, hasn't changed any. People don't have options. There's no way to get a house, there's no way to get a job, there's no such thing as job security in southern West Virginia -- unless you're a tenured teacher. And even then there's no security. Because politicians run the school system, because politicians run the courthouse, because politicians tell whether the coal companies pay taxes or not, because everything is political the condition of powerlessness doesn't seem any better to me than it ever seemed. People are living in the same housing today that they lived in twenty years ago, except it's twenty years older.

It seems to me that one of the things that ought to be obvious is that with so many people unemployed and so many people who need housing, that it would be fairly simple to use some of the money to pay people -- and I'm not talking about Workfare -- a wage to build houses and at the same time train people so they can work in construction and other jobs. There's a lot of work to be done in housing families and it seems to me we ought to be able to figure out a way to do it. I'm real excited about what we're trying to do. We want to develop a pilot program, a more integrated program that goes beyond just building houses. We want to find out what other kinds of help people need, whether it's working with the school system, health care, jobs, all those kinds of issues -- and making the connections where we can.

I: What are your personal visions and dreams?
B: I wish everybody could have what we have here: a couple of acres and a nice house. It really helps your outlook on life generally. The land issue is really a crucial issue. The heart of powerlessness is when people don't have a piece of land to call their own, or a way of getting it. This makes you feel really powerless, so why would you have any right to go in and question anybody about anything if you don't have control over even that much of your own life? I want to keep working on issues like this in whatever way I can. I like to write about them. Writing is such a passive thing. You sit back and talk to people and you're not really doing anything for them. Sometimes the stories move people in some way but you yourself don't. I'd like to combine writing skills with some sort of activism. That can happen in a lot of ways. Sometimes just by supporting people who are taking risks, not by being on the front line with your picture in the paper. I don't know specifically what I will do, but I do know this: anything I can do to help people improve their situations and feel less powerless, I'll sure do it, anytime.
I: What keeps you going in this struggle to help people feel less powerless?
B: You don't know that people will ever own their own land and resources, but it has been worse; and everytime anyone stands up for something--and I've known lots of folks who have paid a high price for this but who would do it over again--things get a little better.

I have to think that some of the things that have happened are little victories. Corporations are paying more taxes, not enough but it's a start; some are giving up land for housing; a woman is taking better care of her kids than her mother did; a principal refuses to discriminate against the poor even though she gets fired. If you keep plugging there may be some hope down the road. And what you're thinking about is not going to happen during your lifetime. You're part of a chain that started long before and will go on long after; and someday, somehow -- if someone else grabs ahold when we let go -- then someday perhaps everything we've been dreaming of and fighting for will be realized. That's what keeps me going.