

Let us now praise mountain women...

—by Clare Hanrahan

"It's wonderful to see all these women here — it's what we need," said Connie Weis of Norton, Virginia, one of the participants in the second annual "In Praise of Mountain Women" celebration held at the Dickenson Conference Center in Abingdon, Virginia, May 3-5.

Weis was one of nearly 200 Appalachian women who came together to share personal stories and to encourage one another in their lives and work. She was a single mother by the age of 16, and by 21 was working in the coal mines, "eight hours a day underground with 10 men. I faced a lot of problems, had to prove myself every day," she said. "I became a strong woman because of that."

The strength and collective wisdom of the women was evident throughout the weekend as the heartfelt sharings continued, interspersed with song and laughter, tears and encouragement.

"I'm seeing now the power of a gathering like this, where we get energized," said Anne Hablas, who came to Appalachia from North Dakota as a Catholic sister and learned how it felt to be an outsider who talked differently and didn't share a common heritage.

"Being a Catholic was not so hot, being a Catholic sister was worse," she said. Hablas recently retired as literacy coordinator at the Mountain Women's Exchange in Jellico, Tennessee, where she "learned a lot of hope and strength, conviction and risk-taking."

The women gathered in "home circles" decorated in the center with collected gifts of the earth, such as bits of bark, flowering branches, seeds and such.

Each participant received a cloth shopping bag handcrafted by women from Lee County, Virginia, and imprinted with the Mountain Women logo designed by Tennessee artist Margaret Gregg. Meals were prepared and

served by a crew of men from the Abingdon 4-H center.

Mary Mills, a member of the Concerned Citizens for Nelly's Cave Community near Blacksburg, Virginia, asked those gathered for help with the ongoing struggle of the African-American residents of Nelly's Cave Road (named for a former slave) who had their lands condemned by the local government to make room for a new road. "We are fighting to prove to people we don't have to lay down and take it," Mills said. "We will be heard."

The women discussed barriers that have kept them from being empowered, and many shared their own. Many had already surmounted significant barriers: many came from impoverished families with as many as 15 children, some with only one supportive parent. They were surviving poverty, addiction, crowded living spaces, exploitation of their land and resources, lack of education and job op-

portunities, welfare intrusions and young marriages. Some care for elderly relatives; others work in the mines, in factories, in the fields.

"When you decide to make a change, put your mind to it. You can accomplish anything you want," was the advice of one woman, who survived a decade of drug addiction to go on to graduate from college.

Another, who once felt herself to be "a timid little person with no skills," said she had to study in secret for her GED (high school equivalency degree) because her husband didn't approve. "I don't want to quit being who I am just to satisfy someone who doesn't approve," she said. "I want it to be said of me: 'She made a difference.' I'm proud to be an Appalachian. I'm proud to be a woman."

[Claire Hanrahan is a freelance writer, nonviolent activist and editor of the journal Rural Southern Voice for Peace. She lives in western North Carolina near the Celo community.]