

Photo exhibit tells stories of communities using art

by Joanie Newman
04.02.09



Nora Dotson, Billie Bender, April Lawrence, Patty Sebok, April Nancy Sutphin, Maria Lambert, Kay Kinder, Misti Pennington, Shannon Bell, and Debbie Santonia, pictured with their favorite photos at the first community Photovoice Project Exhibit at Sherman High School

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Papaws, molly moochers and river ducks were just a few of the things that area women presented in the Southern West Virginia Photovoice Project this past Monday evening.

“This was a chance to share with others the things that make our community unique,” participant Kay Kinder said.

Together, 13 women from the Big Coal River area are telling their communities stories through the use of photos, poetry and essay.

Shannon Bell is proud of the work performed by the women who make up the Big Coal River/Seth group, and that pride shines bright as she speaks about their work during their first community presentation.

The photo exhibition was greeted with positive feedback this past week at Scott High School.

Shannon Bell, a graduate student working towards her PhD in Sociology at the University of Oregon, approached the women at their place of worship, the Hopkins

Fork Community Church, to ask their assistance with the Southern West Virginia Photovoice Project.

“I knew a few community members, Maria Lambert and Patty Sebok, and they recommended that I ask the pastor of the church if he’d be willing to allow me to give a short presentation about the project and ask for volunteers from the church women,” Bell said, commenting that she has observed that churches in southern West Virginia seem to be the center of life in local areas.

“So often our area is portrayed negatively and it is often only the negative things that people see. It was great to share the positive things, too,” April Lawrence said.

From photos titled “Front porch sitting,” to “Loss of Access,” the women shared the stories behind the photos they had collected over the past few months.

Their observations ranged from, “This is a photo of Drawdy Falls, where I met Senator Robert C. Byrd for the first time as a child,” to “Boone County just smells like home,” and “Our community needs a facelift.”

The photos were categorized into three areas- the unique strengths of the area, the beauty of the area, and the problems and major issues in the area.

Topping the list of unique strengths in the area was the presence of mountain people, who Nora Dotson describes as “strong people.”

Unique produce to the area was also mentioned by the women. Papaws, the fruit commonly called “West Virginia’s bananas” and molly moochers, or morel mushrooms, a delicacy in many fine restaurants, were presented. These fruits and vegetables are found in the lovely wilderness of southern West Virginia that these residents call their backyards.

The women also selected pictures taken of churches, stained glass windows, and the Holy Bible – all items that they say represents the religious ties that bind the people to the community.

“Church is an intricate part of our community. It is a place people gather to worship, a place people come to rejoice in the union of two people in marriage, and a place to mourn the loss of a loved one during a funeral. Church is a place of hope for a brighter tomorrow,” Nancy Sutphin writes on her photoboard.

Unlike many peoples’ idea of economic progress being ties into a brick-and-mortar building, participant April Lawrence captured her idea of “trail to economic growth” when she took a picture of the 4-wheeler trail her husband created in their backyard.

“So many men – and women – like to go 4-wheel riding. People pay for this kind of fun. There are many great places throughout the hills of this area that could be dedicated

paying four-wheeler trails,” Lawrence said, further commenting that she didn’t know why economic progress had to come at the expense of the beauty of nature.

The category of “Big Coal River Area Beauty” had many beautiful panoramic scenes of area trees in their fall foliage, an area waterfall, and of course – the Big Coal River.

Lastly, the women presented and spoke about the pictures they had captured for the category, “Big Coal River Area Concerns and Problems.”

Drug abuse led this category, with pictures of drug paraphernalia. Next in this category, the women identified litter in the river and creeks as a top problem in their community.

“Coal River Ducks and Buzzards,” a photo taken by Kay Kinder, describes plastic bottles as coal river “ducks” and black plastic garbage bags as the “buzzards.”

Maria Lambert had taken several photos under this category for water contamination. “The Changing of the Water Filter,” shows two filters – one sparkling white and the other a deep black in contrast.

“The white water filter is brand new. The black one is only three months old. It has become unthinkably black from something lurking in the well. My dad says it looks like pure coal slurry water and he should know, as he worked at a coal tippie for many years and saw first-hand what it looked and smelled like,” Lambert said.

The Photovoice project participants have moved into identifying four additional projects they would like to undertake as a community.

The first is the creation of a Big Coal River Area Web site. The purpose of the proposed site will be to promote pride and preserve the rich history of the area.

The second project being considered is a Big Coal River beautification project where community creek and road clean-up days would be designated, with flowers and other foliage planted in key areas, such as the Racine “Y” (or intersection of Rt. 3).

Third on their list is a drug watch committee that would involve the Boone County Sheriff’s Department and the final project the participants have identified as necessary is increasing civic engagement in the area.

According to Bell, the idea behind Photovoice is to empower residents of small communities to identify their community’s problems themselves, instead of having someone from outside areas identify those problems for them.

Photovoice is a component of Bell’s PhD dissertation, in which she is studying complex issues of growing social capital and positive change.

Bell has been working closely with the Boone County residents for the past seven

months, and says the group of 13 women from the Big Coal River area is the largest group of women currently participating in five- community project.

In September the women were given a digital camera with the instructions to take photos of their community – the good, the bad, even the ugly.

“Hopefully it has helped give them empowered needs assessments that they can do on their own; civic engagement and an increased pride in their communities,” Bell says of the project.

The five groups met every month to share their photographs and discuss common themes. Then, the created “photostories,” or photographs with written narratives to share with others.

The Big Coal River area group consist of Billie Bender, Donna Bowles, Elizabeth Deal-Turner, Nora Dotson, Kay Kinder, Maria Lambert, April Lawrence, Misti Pennington, Debbie Santonia, Toni Santonia, Patty Sebok and Nancy Sutphin.

If you missed their work, you can view it at the Clay Center on April 17, from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m.

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