

Through Their Eyes, In Their Words: Forty Women Telling the Story of Their Home

The Southern West Virginia Photovoice Project

Introduction by Shannon Elizabeth Bell, Project Director

The pages in this book are filled with the photographs and words of forty women living in five different areas of Southern West Virginia, all of whom participated in an eight-month “Photovoice” project. These women’s “photostories” (photographs with written narratives) depict life in their region - the strengths and assets of their communities, the unique character of life in the area, the problems and issues of concern for residents, and these women’s ideas for positive community change. The five Photovoice groups are located in the following areas of Southern West Virginia:

- Big Coal River Area of Boone County (Prenter, Seth, Racine, Ashford communities)
- Pond Fork Area of Boone County (Wharton, Bim, Van, Bandytown, Twilight communities)
- Lenore Area of Mingo County
- Harts Area of Lincoln County
- Upper Kanawha Valley of Kanawha County (Cabin Creek and Winifrede communities)

In September of 2008, women in these five areas were recruited through local churches, given digital cameras, and asked simply to take pictures to “tell the story” of their communities, including the positive and negative aspects of life. Each of the five community groups met monthly for the duration of the eight-month project to share their photographs, discuss common themes, create photostories, and develop project ideas to address problems they identified.

In March and April of 2009, each of the five groups held an exhibit and local presentation in their community to share their photostories and project ideas with the public. Each participant selected ten photostories to be enlarged and mounted for the local display. In addition, each woman was invited to select up to three photostories to be shown in a regional Photovoice exhibit from April 15-19, 2009 at the Clay Center for the Arts and Sciences in Charleston, West Virginia. The photostories exhibited at the Clay Center have been reproduced and organized thematically in this book.

In this collection of photostories you will find pride, joy, sorrow, anger, beauty, and inspiration. I am still overcome with awe each time I look at the body of work these forty women have created. What I have been most struck by is the deep love these women have for their communities. It is clear that the concerns and problems they articulate stem from this love for – and desire to protect – their homes. It is my hope that those reading this book will view these photostories with an open mind and seriously consider the Photovoice women’s concerns and dreams for their Southern West Virginia communities.

This project started as a component of my dissertation research, but it was constructed in a way that would give the participants ownership over what was produced through the Photovoice process. Not only did the Photovoice women decide what to photograph, how to write about their photographs, and which of their

photostories would be included in the local and regional exhibits, but all of the enlarged and mounted photostories have also stayed in the possession of the five community groups so that they can plan future Photovoice exhibits in and around their communities.

This project has had different purposes for the various women involved in the project. Many have focused their efforts on dispelling negative stereotypes about their region, showcasing the breathtaking beauty of Southern West Virginia's mountains, creeks, and wildlife. Others have chosen to document important cultural traditions and the rich history of the area through their photostories. Some have even used their photostories as a way to directly communicate their concerns and ideas to legislators and others with political power. Examples of all of these types of photostories can be found in the pages that follow. In addition, the entirety of the Photovoice project (over 400 photostories) can be viewed at our online gallery at www.WVPhotovoice.org.

I am extremely grateful to the many organizations and sponsors who made this project possible through their generous financial and administrative support: Cabin Creek Health Systems; The Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation; The West Virginia Development Office/Appalachian Regional Commission; Photographic Production Services; Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition; the University of Oregon Sociology Department's Wasby-Johnson Dissertation Award; the American Sociological Association's Spivack Program in Applied Social Research and Social Policy; Richard York; and the Clay Center for the Arts and Sciences. I am also grateful to Sean Bemis, Susan and Tom Bell, Patricia Feeney, Vivian Stockman, Yvonne Braun, Michael Dreiling, Ellen Scott, Carol Silverman, Nancy Reinhart, Jocelyn Gaujot, Courtney Smith, Amber Crist, Craig Robinson, and Jennifer Russell for their amazing support, ideas, assistance, and guidance. A special thank you to Hopkins Fork Community Church, Freedom United Baptist Church, Van United Methodist Church, Sharon Church of God, and the Ferrellsburg Community Center for providing the Photovoice groups a place to meet. And finally, my deepest thanks to all of the Photovoice women. I am so moved by the love that you have for your communities, and I am eternally grateful to you for sharing your lives with me over this eight month project (and beyond).

For more information about the Southern West Virginia Photovoice Project, please contact Shannon Elizabeth Bell at: WVPhotovoice@gmail.com or visit our website at www.WVPhotovoice.org

PHOTOVOICE PARTICIPANTS

In alphabetical order

Big Coal River Area Group, Boone County

Billie Bender
Donna Bowles
Nora Dotson
Kay Kinder
Maria Lambert*
April Lawrence
Misti Pennington
Teresa Perdue
Debbie Santonia
Toni Santonia
Patty Sebok
Nancy Sutphin
Elizabeth Deal Turner

Lenore Area Group, Mingo County

Aimee Colegrove
Amy Copley*
Anna Hartley
Donna Hatfield
Pat Tingler
Violet Vance

Pond Fork Area Group, Boone County

Brenda Farris
Joanne Frame
Tammy Frame
Joan V. Linville*
Mary Jane Linville

Harts Area Group, Lincoln County

Crystal Carter
Anita Frye
Karen Hartman
Lori Mitchell*
Rena Thompson
Kay Tomblin
PJ Watts
(Youth member Sara Butcher)

Upper Kanawha Valley Group, Kanawha County

Terri Bailey
Anna Boswell
Kandace Edwards
JoAnn King
Linda Pullen Perdue
Stella "Sue" Pullen
Kathy Stout*
Loretta Watkins
Lahoma White

*Indicates Community Facilitator. These individuals helped with participant recruitment and coordination in their Photovoice group.