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Impoverishment and the Mining Industry in the Appalachian Mountains

An Interview with Marie Cirillo, Co-founder of the Woodland Community Land Trust (WCLT)



FIGURE 1 Marie Cirillo in her Appalachian environment, November 2005. (Photo by Marie Blanchard)

Susanne Wymann von Dach (MRD): Marie Cirillo, in 1967 you moved from Chicago to Clearfork Valley in the Appalachians. Why did you move to this mountain region?

Marie Cirillo: I moved to Chicago in 1964 and lived in a community with 40,000 Appalachian migrants. Four years later we Glenmary Sisters moved out of the convent. We wanted more contact with people and less restrictions on our lives from church regulations. At that time I decided to go back to the mountains, and with 43 other women we formed a non-profit organization committed to working and living in Appalachian communities. I came here with a determination to find out why people could not live in a rural community, although that was what they desired for their families.

What did you find in Clearfork Valley?

I found a community that was suffering from outmigration, marginalization, loss of social values, and degradation of their mountain environment. The welcoming postmaster, Louise Adams, was the only person occupying any public space and as such was counselor, advisor, and advocate for anyone who sought her. Louise told me that when she started work as postmaster she was serving 12,000 people. During WW II all the men joined the service. She joined too. When she returned home, machines were doing the miners' work. Families started leaving. The day Louise shared this information with me she was serving a population of 1200, most of whom were elderly. Often their children would leave grandchildren with their grandparents while the young parents traveled to various cities in search of a job. Major stress was put on the rural community when children returned after being out of work for weeks. But for generations people with a mountain heritage have lived with the boom-and-bust cycles of coal mining and developed amazing resilience. There was a 15- to 20-year period of movement back and forth from city to country. From the time I arrived here in 1967 until now, life has stabilized, with an estimated population of some 5000 people.

The poverty of the people living in Clearfork Valley seems to have deep-rooted and complex causes. What are the most important ones in your view?

Historically, Appalachia provided most of the food, fuel, and building materials during the early days of urban growth in the northeastern part of the United States. As the western lands were open to settlement, agricultural products and timber came from the West and rural Appalachia remained important for its coal. After WWII, the men came home to a land completely reworked by the industry. They watched coal camp after coal camp being torn down—not by war but for progress.

Before a union was organized, most miners and their families were extremely vulnerable to company practices. When the union gained a voice, work and pay got better. But the miners had no place in the community to invest their money; the land belonged mostly to the companies. The company towns allowed for almost no option but to be dependent on the company for everything. However, one could buy a car. The news reporters would always manage the photos of the shack (very poor housing) and the Cadillac (expensive car), leaving it to the readers to judge the miners by their own options for investing. That produced stereotypes that mountain people still live with: “hill-billy,” “lazy,” “white trash,” and “people who never had enough get-up-and-go” to get up and go.

Local people here also suffer from rising land prices. Today, in the United States, many well-to-do urban dwellers go to mountain areas seeking the amenities of quiet, beauty, a better pace of life, etc. In the counties in which the Clearfork Valley is located, those places untouched by mining are being bought up for expensive housing developments. The towns are excited about this development. But we mountain people can't help but wonder where we are. How will we fit into the game plans of the mining companies, the developers, and the county officials? The limits of our government, and the lack of a significant voting population in areas with an economy based on extracting non-renewable resources, create a challenge

most public officers and private citizens would rather ignore.

Recently, the government reformed the welfare system. The rural poor today have an extremely hard time fulfilling the new obligations placed on them by these reforms. In some cases people turn to seemingly easy sources of income, eg marijuana production, and get into serious trouble. Once a person has a prison record, they lose their voting rights. If their felony is drug-related, they might even lose their food stamps. And so they become more marginalized and must suffer more and work harder because of their status.

Finally, mining technology and methods in the past half century have led to massive environmental degradation. Mud has been sliding into people's homes. The fish die in the Clearfork River. Places never before flooded are being destroyed after hard rains. Some who live "up the hollow" (in a remote place) would leave if someone bought their house. But who would buy a house prone to mudslides and so far removed from any services, schools, or job opportunities? Today, some of these people have become the stubborn, determined initiators of community-based organizations that care for the well-being of the community.

In the 1970s, the idea of developing a Community Land Trust seems to have gained momentum in Clearfork Valley. How did this happen?

The community created 2 opportunities to get a handle on our situation of landlessness in the 1970s. The first was an effort to bring some industry, other than coal, into the community so that all of our young people would not have to move. We went to the state to see what it would take to advertise Clearfork as a place that could invite an industry to come and look at us. We learned that we had to be an "incorporated town" and would have to have an industrial site. We could not meet the requirements to become an incorporated town. Nevertheless, we formed a non-profit organization, the Model Valley Development Corporation, got a factory site, and started advertising our needs in newspapers. A city 80 miles from here decided to

open an extension of a sewing factory. Then we found a company in Ohio that wanted to purchase wood pallets. The group built a factory on their site, announced 14 job openings, and got 70 applications, mostly from local people who had moved to cities.

The second opportunity—the Woodland Community Land Trust (WCLT)—was created after the massive floods that hit this region in the late 1970s, due mainly to environmental degradation. After the floods, the government moved thousands of mobile units on their new highways to help the homeless, but they could not put them on family land because these families were now on a floodplain. For months the mobile homes remained on the highway. Finally the governor of West Virginia, exercising his power of eminent domain, took land from companies and settled the mobile units on it. Still, the needs of families remained secondary to coal production. That pushed us to organize a Community Land Trust.

Can you tell us about the concept of a Community Land Trust?

A Community Land Trust (CLT) does not sell its land, but rather, takes it off the speculative market and distributes it through a life-time renewable lease to residents who need land and are ready to live up to the lease agreements about ways to care for the land and one's neighbors. All developments on the land are ideally owned by those leasing the land.

The growth of the CLT movement in the United States sustains a vitality that is rooted in a philosophy about land. Aldo Leopold, the great American conservationist, argued that "land should be a community to which we belong, not a commodity that is bought and sold." Henry George, a 19th century political scientist, called the commodification of land a speculative gain, an unearned increment. He noted that the buying of land by those with the most money distorted the economic system, placing value where no real value had been created and, therefore, transferring wealth unfairly. Robert Swan, the founding president of the E.F. Schumacher Society in the United States, combined such home-based

"What if the majority of the poor in this mountain mining community had the land to cut their own trees, house the sawmill, build their own homes? What if we had the land to grow our food and gather our heating sources, the forest for hunting, the water for catching, the wild plants to gather? What if we had the facilities to provide public space for educational advancement and social cohesion important to building a community and engaging in community development?"

FIGURE 2 The first Land Trust house, designed by the Federation of Appalachian Housing Inc. The lower house on the right is a typical Tennessee Valley design. Mortgage financing for the Land Trust house came from the Churches. (Photo by Marie Cirillo)



“When poison escapes from the mines, the birds die and we humans take heed to fix the problem so that we may live. We who live in coal mining areas are, for our nation, what the bird is to the coal mining community. We belong to Earth. Earth does not belong to us. We are preparing for a post-industrial era and how we fade in and out of the real world is a challenge to all of us who dare to get involved.”

thinkers with Leo Tolstoy and the Gandhian Vinoba Bhave to develop a new land tenure system for North America, which he called a Community Land Trust. Swan first applied the idea in rural Georgia where African Americans, who made the transition from plantation slaves to freemen, were still struggling for their freedom to shape a livelihood for themselves. Some 10 years later we started a CLT here and at the same time tried to mobilize a regional grassroots effort to change land ownership/control practices in this region of our country.

What benefits did the WCLT offer the people? How did it change people’s lives?

Today the WCLT (Figure 2) has 450 acres of mountain land held in trust for community needs. About 50 of those acres are suitable for human settlement. The Model Valley Development Corporation has almost 200 acres, most of which have been sold to private entrepreneurs at the village square and to private homeowners. Some small family-owned parcels remain. The industries still retain over 40,000 acres. The majority of the board who manage the CLT land live on the land trust or have some special ties to the land trust and the Clearfork Valley. There are presently 20 families living on the land trust, and 36 living on lands

acquired by the Model Valley Development Corporation.

The CLT has resident committees dealing with agriculture and special events. A road committee became too much for the residents to manage and is, indeed, too much for our small organization. The CLT has spun off 2 of their major undertakings. A Woodland Community Development Corporation now has a separate board to assist with home construction and mortgage financing. While people have a 99-year renewable lease on the land, they own the developments on that land. Now the Corporation partners with state and regional organizations that have funds for construction, mortgage financing, training for home ownership, and savings clubs. They manage an average of 1–2 homes a year.

Making the WCLT work is apparently not the end of your development efforts: hasn’t your organization also engaged in establishing a Community Learning Center?

Indeed, we now also have the Clearfork Community Institute, that has taken over the responsibility for what started out as the CLT’s “living-learning program.” This is work still in progress. Since 1998, another handful of people have been raising money and engaging paid and unpaid labor in repairing the last remaining schoolhouse in the old coal camps. The space, once fully renovated, will be an educational and social center to serve local people and to extend hospitality to visitors who come to see, be engaged in, and learn about this coal mining area.

What role does the education of girls and boys, and of women and men, play in overcoming poverty in the Appalachians? What are the most important topics taken up in the learning center? Who attends courses?

Because of our physical, historical, and contemporary grounding in a special place within a maturing nation, we believe the Clearfork Community Institute will be a great asset in creating local leaders from within this very depressed and marginalized community. No matter what practical, scheduled programs are offered, we are

FIGURE 3 The Fordham University event in New York, 2005, with participants from grassroots organizations as well as international agencies. (Photo by Marie Cirillo)

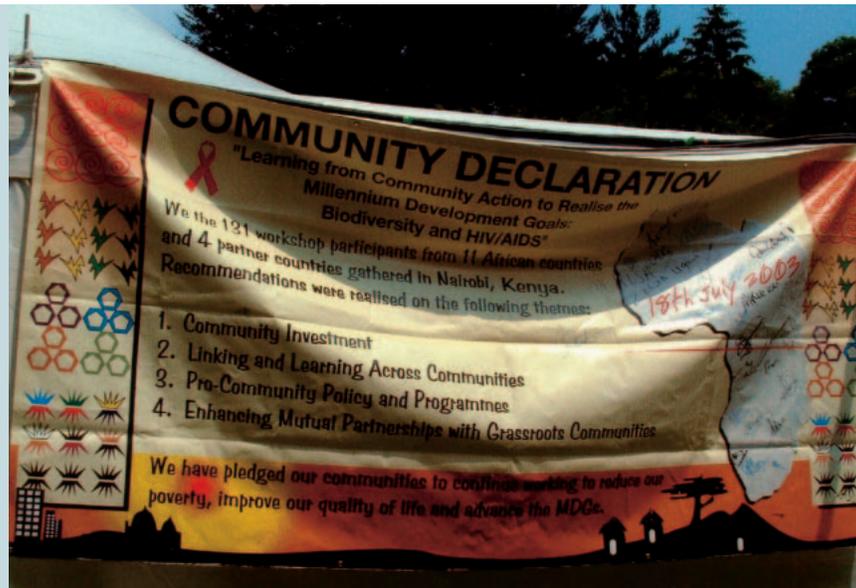
part of a collaborative community effort to work towards opportunities for a meaningful livelihood, creating a sustainable community, and revitalizing our spirit-culture.

Within any specific curriculum, the Institute will help build a sense of community and support initiatives for development. The learning processes emphasize communication, volunteerism, information, and demonstrations. *Communication* will develop with technology, artistic expressions, and face-to-face encounters. These will be facilitated by a cyber cafe, a theater, and peer exchanges. *Volunteerism* will allow people to give of their natural talents, to strengthen the non-cash economy that can build community assets, and to broaden their knowledge, understanding, and appreciation by working side-by-side with college students and others who come to us as volunteers. Volunteers can be mobilized to serve families, entrepreneurs, and non-profit groups. *Information* can be acquired and created in the resource center where archives, a research department, and a virtual women's center will be accessible. *Demonstrations* can be found among families and within local organizations. They will be the sites for training staff and community volunteers so that these new approaches to achieving a meaningful livelihood, a sustainable community, and a revitalized spirit-culture can be passed on to family, kin, friends, and visitors.

Does what happened between 1967 and today in Clearfork Valley have any relation to international efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals?

The way nations engage citizens in shaping development policies has everything to do with peace and will have a direct impact on progress made on the Millennium Development Goals.

It was clear to me when I attended a 4-day meeting at Fordham University in New York (Figure 3) with some impressive grassroots leaders from developing nations and some high-ranking staff from the United Nations, the World Bank, and other international organizations, that the United States, as a developed nation, was supposed to contribute funds to support developing countries. When asked about



why we needed the partnership between developing countries and these larger establishments in order to meet the Millennium Goals by 2015, I felt I was holding my tongue when I made the following, relatively harmless statement: "I don't know what our government is doing to help you, but I can tell you that our Community Institute is raising money to put a geothermal heating system in our center. We can at least reduce the use of and emissions from coal." Having raised US\$27,000 towards this goal, we are now asking for a grant and a loan from the US Department of Agriculture to complete the project. We have also dared to ask the coal, gas, oil, timber, trucking, and railroad companies for donations. Why not open the door for them to participate in our initiative? We hope our request is seen as an invitation from us for them to partner in this first step towards changing our unsustainable habits.

These are the kinds of questions we can ask. And by asking such questions we are not trying to negate global markets. I believe every community must realize its own potential to care for its natural resources, its development, and its residents. Neighborliness will extend to trading between communities. That community system and neighborhood ethic offers both a safety net for a community and a model for how global marketing can be negotiated in a good neighbor relationship.

Marie Cirillo moved from Brooklyn, New York, to Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1947 and joined a group of missionary sisters who had just organized to serve the rural areas of America's southern states after WW II. The inspiration of the founder of the Glenmary Sisters was to preserve certain highly valued qualities of rural people as they moved to the cities. In 1964, the group responded to the outmigration of some 3 million people from the Appalachian Mountains. They opened houses in Cincinnati, Detroit, and Chicago. A few years later, some members went to the Appalachians to work with those who had remained in the mountains and were living under very difficult social, economic, legal, and environmental conditions. This e-mail interview with Marie Cirillo was conducted in early November 2005 by Susanne Wymann von Dach and edited by Anne Zimmermann, both Assistant Editors, MRD.