

“Mountains, Music & Memories”

A Lasting World's 5th Annual Roots & Remembrance Environmental Weekend
in Kentucky
May 5-6-7, 2006

ALW held its 5th annual Roots & Remembrance Weekend in southeastern Kentucky May 5-6-7, 2006. ALW Angels and guests who participated were: Laura, Tyna, Amber, Chris and Brendon from Indiana, Lynne and Jim from Wisconsin, Rochelle, Harvey, Tera and Kate from Massachusetts, Ali and Betty from Canada, Dan and Lindsey from Georgia, Whitney, Dave and Jerry from Kentucky, and Linda and Wen from Illinois. And of course – “Keby Bear” was along on the trip, too! ☺

On May 5, our theme was “Mountains.” As every ALW Angel knows, mountaintop removal mining and valley fills threaten to change the entire ecosystem of the Appalachian Mountains. Our ‘field trip’ on May 5 gave us a glimpse of both the serene and the scarred setting of the mountains of southeastern Kentucky.

Early that morning, with the weather cooperating beautifully, we carpooled from our hotel in Renfro Valley to the town of Hyden, where we met up with our good friend Jerry Hardt, from Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC). Jerry had arranged for us to visit the home of long-time mountain residents Daymon and Betty, and to get an eyewitness view of an actual mountaintop removal mining site near Daymon and Betty’s property.

From the town of Hyden, we followed Jerry up another long and winding road (yes, it did get a little scary!) to our destination. Daymon and Betty warmly welcomed us and served us all some of their special homemade bean soup and their homegrown garden vegetables. After Daymon and Betty shared the history of their modest, but beautiful home, Daymon invited us to come on a tour of his mountain. While the rest of the group drove a few miles and then WALKED a few miles, Linda, Wen, Brendon and “Keby Bear” were treated to a ride right up the side of the mountain on Daymon’s 6-wheeler! As he drove, Daymon (a certified herbalist) pointed out native trees and plants, explained the plants’ medicinal and/or edible properties, talked about the native wildlife, and shared more of his life story. When the entire group convened in one spot, we all paused to view a clearing where over 50 trees on Daymon’s land had been illegally logged. The trees still sat there, proof that Daymon had refused to let the loggers finish their job or take his trees from his property.

Now Daymon took us on a walk in the mountain woods. We saw more native flowers and herbs, and we witnessed new, growing, healthy American Chestnut trees! We smelled the minty sweetness of cherry bark, and we learned how to make leaves ‘pop!’ We walked through water flowing from a clear, pristine mountain spring, and we stopped to listen to birdcalls. At one point we heard a loud siren, sounding very much like the tornado sirens in the Midwest. Daymon told us to wait about 5 minutes, and to listen again. In almost exactly that amount of time, we heard a rumble louder than thunder and we felt a slight tremor. We knew what that meant. We were very close to a mountaintop removal mining site where blasting was occurring that very day.

Daymon's property was a peaceful, dense, lush forest of trees covering his mountain on all sides. It was a sharp contrast from what we would see next.

Right at the edge of Daymon's property, butting up to it dangerously close, was a mountaintop removal mining site that had been abandoned because the coal company could go no further without trespassing on Daymon's land. Since Daymon refused to sell out to the coal company, they had been forced to move a little further away to continue their work. What they left behind totally sickened and disgusted us. The surface of the Moon probably has more life than the land that almost touches Daymon's property. There was now absolutely NOTHING where a mountain had once peaked and where trees had once touched the skyline. We took photos, but even they don't show what one sees and feels when he/she witnesses the destruction first hand.

We asked how this could be happening. We wanted to know why the government didn't stop this terrible destruction. We wanted to know why the coal companies did not have to take responsibility for the problems they have caused for the mountain residents. There were no answers that appeased us.

The return to Daymon's home was quiet and somber. We encouraged him not to give in to the coal companies who want to pay him to leave his mountain. We vowed to help take a more rigid stand against the practice of mountaintop removal mining. We promised him we would not forget him. He assured us that, 'the Lord willing,' that he would still be in his home the next time we visited. He proudly proclaimed "I'm a MOUNTAIN man, and I'll always be a mountain man."

We left Daymon's and we again followed Jerry to a place where the coal company was actively engaged in mountaintop removal mining. This spot showed much more extensive damage and seemed even more horrendous than the leveled mountains near Daymon's home. With equipment noisily grinding, with coal trucks being filled and with dust and debris everywhere, we pulled off the road to take photos of what we were witnessing.

Almost immediately, a man in a white truck drove up to us. He told us he was the boss of the operation and that we could not be there. He was rude and he was trying to be very intimidating. He stood watching us until we all got back into our vehicles. When we pulled back onto the road, he followed us. Before long, two other white trucks had joined him, and all THREE of them were following us down the mountain. When we stopped to take photos at another spot, the men again attempted to tell us we could not stop and that we could not be in this area. When we got back on the road again, not only the three white trucks followed us. After a few minutes, we saw a huge, heavy, overloaded coal truck roaring down the narrow road just behind us. Instead of trying to slow down, as he got nearer, the truck driver merely blasted a warning on his horn and just kept speeding towards us! There was very little space on the side of the road where we could pull over. The truck raced by us, still blaring on his horn. As we pulled back out onto the road, all of us still visibly shaken, we noticed that the three white trucks were not following us. They remained parked on the side of the road, and we watched in horror as a second overloaded coal truck sped in our direction! This truck ran stop signs and increased his speed as he got closer and closer to us. This time it was even harder to

find a safe spot to avoid a crash – but again, REAL angels must have been on our side! We watched the second truck roar by us, coming to the sick realization that these trucks had purposely been SENT for us. It took a few minutes for our hearts to stop beating wildly. We continued our trek down the mountain, with only one white truck still following just a few yards behind us.

When we turned back out onto a highway, the white truck retreated. We drove back into the town of Hyden, and we had a long discussion about the tactics the coal company had used to make sure we felt unwelcome, intimidated and endangered!

Questions: If they don't have anything to hide, why were they worried about the photos were taking? If they aren't doing anything wrong, why are they so defensive? Hmmmm.....

Back in Renfro Valley, our evening was much 'lighter.' Over a tasty pizza dinner, we presented ALW's 'year in review.' We held our Silent Auction, we recognized and awarded prizes to the 4 children who participated in our first-ever Kevin's Kids Project, and we announced the winners of the raffle for Kevin's vest and the signed BSB photo we were giving away. Then it was into bed, to rest up for our work (and play!) on Saturday!

Saturday found us taking the LONG WAY (sorry, guys!) to the Daniel Boone National Forest, where we met up with ALW member Tracy Powell-McCoy, a middle school teacher in Richmond, KY. Tracy and her colleagues brought a busload of 20 students to the Forest, to assist us in working on our adopted acre of American Chestnut trees. After a picnic lunch, we crossed the creek (it was very clear – and it was very COLD on our bare feet!) and took a good look at our acre. The trees that survived last year's flooding have GROWN! We were all very excited to see how well they were doing! We cleared, weeded, and mulched around each Chestnut tree on the acre, under the guidance of Rita Wehner and Jeff Lewis from the Cumberland District Office. Jeff, especially, was a great instructor, historian and assistant who helped us learn as we worked!

We got back to Renfro Valley almost JUST in time for our evening candlelight ceremony. We had a delicious chicken dinner, then headed over to the Kentucky Music Hall of Fame and Museum, where Mr. Robert Lawson, Executive Director, welcomed us and assisted us in setting up for our ceremony.

The evening's theme was "Mountains, Music & Memories." As the sun set in the beautiful valley, we lit over 350 votive candles (132 of them in the shape of a heart), each one representing a person, a pet or a place someone had remembered with love. Mr. Lawson welcomed everyone and talked about the rich history of music the state of Kentucky has given the world. Dave Cooper shared his personal journey from high-powered businessman to environmental activist. Dan Marcec played guitar and sang an original composition as well as three songs composed by other artists. Laura, Lynne and Jerry read the names of all those who had been remembered with candles. Robert Lawson was named ALW Friend of the Year. Young Amber from Indiana was named ALW Angel of the Year. Wen read a statement from Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., written specifically for this event. Linda read a statement from Kevin Richardson, ALW's Honorary Chairperson and constant supporter of our efforts for the environment. Kevin's

statement was also written for us especially for this event! (Both statements follow this review.) It's very hard to put into words the feelings, the emotions and the hopes always invoked by our Remembrance Ceremony. We pray that all of you will someday get a chance to attend our annual candlelight event, so that you can see for yourselves what a magical, memorable evening it really is.

Warmed in our hearts, but chilled by the Kentucky evening air, we headed back to the hotel for a light-hearted, late-night Kentucky Derby Party!

Each weekender donned a "Derby Hat," those of us who were 'of age' had Mint Juleps, we 'smoked' chocolate cigars, and we drew 'Kevin Lucky Bucks' to win raffle prizes. Each of us had picked a toy horse out of a bag, and each horse had the name of one of the actual Derby entries. Harvey's horse, Barbaro, had won the Derby – so Harvey won the Derby Dinner prize! We feasted on Derby cake, and we enjoyed each other's company before retiring to our own rooms.

Sunday morning included a tour of the Kentucky Music Hall of Fame and Museum for some of us, and then came the part we all hated – saying good-bye. When you spend a weekend full of fun, friendship and accomplishments, it's hard to let it end. We wished everyone safe trips – with a promise that we would all meet together again – hopefully – in Kentucky!

A Personal Message to R&R Participants from ALW's Honorary Chairperson, Kevin Richardson:

I'm honored that A Lasting World has decided to do this event. I hope everyone enjoys this mountain. I had a lot of wonderful memories growing up here. Peace and Love, Kevin Richardson. - April 2006.

Statement of Support by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.:

I flew over the coalfields of Kentucky and West Virginia with local activists in May 2002, witnessing from the air the barren moonscapes left behind by strip mining and mountaintop removal. Beyond these visible earthen scars, I saw the less visible casualties of our nation's dependence on coal—devastated communities, wrecked economies and ruined lives—the coal truth.

There was no environmental issue about which my father cared more than strip mining in Appalachia. He taught me about the union-busting ways of the coal barons, and explained that the strip miners were not just destroying the environment, they were permanently impoverishing the region, wrecking local economies, and endangering the vibrant culture and sense of pride that runs deep in Appalachian communities.

Things have gotten much worse since my father's tours of Appalachia. Coal-mining companies and coal-burning utilities essentially bought themselves the keys to the White House in 2000, spending \$20 million to put Bush in office, and tens of millions more since. These industries have reaped the rewards of their investment many times over. The Bush Administration has granted them virtually unfettered access to destroy more

mountains and communities, enabling record profits at the expense of the environment.

The coal industry uses Orwellian language like “clean coal technology” to pull the wool over the eyes of unsuspecting Americans. But you all know better than this. There is no such thing as clean coal.

I’m sorry I couldn’t be with you in person today, but please know that I stand beside you daily in the fight to protect your health and the well-being of your communities from King Coal. You are fighting not just for a clean and wholesome environment but for the landscapes and values that make America great. With such brave and unrelenting heroes as yourselves, I am confident that we can bring these polluters to justice and stop the pillage of Appalachia. - Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. – April 2006