



SOCM members participate in a “tug of war” competition at their annual meeting in 2010. The “tug of war” has been a SOCM tradition since the ‘70s.

Once It’s Gone, It’s Gone

—Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment (SOCM)

BY BETH GRIFFIN

“Coal is both a very complicated and a very uncomplicated subject. It has been a driver and a buster of the economy in Appalachia for more than a century,” Ann League says. She is the executive director of Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment (SOCM), a Tennessee organization that encourages civic involvement and collective action on environmental, economic, educational, and justice issues.

SOCM has received local and national funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD).

“Once coal comes into town, it’s the only game in town. It creates a ‘mono’ economy with a boom and bust cycle. But it’s a finite fuel, and once it’s gone, it’s gone, taking with it the economic driver of the community,” Ann says. “Coal mining is also extremely devastating to the environment.”

Ann is the third executive director in SOCM’s 46-year history. She joined the group because she was concerned about the impact of coal mining on the water quality in and near her home.

Coal runs in seams through rock and acts as a natural filter for water that collects underground. Most of the methods of

mining coal, including strip mining and mountaintop removal, cause a chemical reaction that creates sulfuric acid, Ann says. The acid percolates through the ground and leeches out heavy metals—such as arsenic, selenium, and mercury—that are dangerous to humans.

“In rural areas where coal mines are prevalent, most people rely on well water. The contaminated water looks clear, but the heavy metals impact health,” she says.

Coal mining also happens to be in decline because of shrinking demand. Coal was used to generate half of all electricity in the United States until the last decade. But in 2017, coal accounted for only 30% of U.S. electricity production.

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WHAT IS CCHD?



Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of

CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the CCHD has contributed over \$300 million to more than 8,000 low-income led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.

LETTER FROM



THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends:

I take clean water for granted. As a city dweller, I don't think twice about turning on the tap to get water for drinking, cooking, or bathing.

But lately, I have been thinking about both the obvious and invisible threats to clean water and air. Ann League is the longtime executive director of Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment (SOCM) in Tennessee, a group CCHD has funded for more than two decades. Ann and her SOCM colleagues have worked tirelessly to minimize and ameliorate the devastating environmental and economic impacts of coal mining, fracking, and solid waste disposal on neighbors in Appalachia.

Ann first encountered SOCM when she grew concerned about water quality at her home near a coal-mining operation. Like most people in her area, she relied on a well for all her water. She learned that the clear, seemingly clean water in the local wells (and mountain springs) was actually contaminated by poisonous heavy metals. Coal normally filters these metals. But the deadly arsenic, selenium, and mercury leached into the ground water after rain fell on mountains whose tops were removed to strip coal from the earth.

SOCM has channeled the frustration of people affected by environmental abuse into consistent, effective action. SOCM brings people together, helps them share their concerns, and works with them to understand and access the legal and regulatory processes to make things better.

When CCHD met SOCM, it was a small group focusing on a half dozen rural counties in the Cumberland Mountains. We have watched with great interest as SOCM has expanded across the state of Tennessee, formed partnerships with other groups, and developed chapters in urban and suburban areas while maintaining its leadership on rural issues. Its areas of interest and expertise now include equitable public school funding, workplace rights, and fair lending practices.

In this issue, we also remember Marvin Krier Mich, whose dedicated tenure as CCHD director for the Diocese of Rochester, NY, ended with his untimely death last November. Please include Marv, his family, and his colleagues in your prayers.

Thank you for your support of CCHD during this season of prayerful reflection. I am grateful to you.



RALPH McCLOUD, Director
Catholic Campaign for
Human Development



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live in poverty.*



TOP TO BOTTOM

A drill rig on a surface coal mine in Campbell County. The rig drills dozens of holes that will be filled with high explosives to blast away huge amounts of rock and soil to expose the thin coal seams. Flight courtesy of SouthWings.

The telltale orange water from "acid mine drainage" seeping from a surface mine site.

SOCM members presenting about their work across the state to fellow members at an annual meeting.

SOCM staff and members getting information and signing up to speak at a public hearing concerning coal ash disposal on a surface mine site in Cumberland County.

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"The Industrial Revolution couldn't have happened without coal, but we should have retired mining long ago," Ann reflects. "Coal is at its best when you leave it alone to be nature's best water filter."

"Coal's negative impacts linger, and they leave a legacy of polluted land, air, and water," Ann says. "Several peer-reviewed studies identified long-lasting effects on mental and physical health of people in historic coal communities. Our members are working to identify and hopefully lessen those impacts."

SOCM prides itself on being a true grassroots organization. "We try to follow the Iron Rule: never do for others what they can do for themselves," Ann says. "We give people the training and tools so they can use their own voices. We are here as staff to be a resource, but it's the members who decide the priorities and do the work."

SOCM was initially called Save Our Cumberland Mountains. It grew out of health surveys conducted by the Vanderbilt University Student Health Coalition in the 1960s and 1970s. Students helped organize health clinics

and later worked with residents to pass a bill that compelled large absentee land corporations to pay taxes on their mineral-rich land. SOCM now has members in 91 of Tennessee's 95 counties. "They get wonderful civics training and learn to read permits and how to lobby and run a meeting, among other things," Ann says.

One of SOCM's efforts works to limit hazardous waste in landfills. "Humans generate a lot of trash, and landfills are often sited in rural, low-wealth counties where people have the least [political] power," Ann says.

Tennessee has a law, the Jackson Law, that allows counties who invoke it to approve or deny solid waste disposal permits. If a county does not exercise its right, the state can make the determination itself. So SOCM members remind counties of this right and urge them to use it to restrict landfill permits.

Recently, Ann says, "when a private landfill in Campbell County wanted a permit modification to accept hazardous waste at a landfill approved only for household waste, SOCM urged the

county commission to invoke the law and deny the permit."

SOCM members keep an eye on legislation and requests for permits. They check public notices in newspapers throughout the state to see whether and how environmental regulations are threatened. They also ask people living near coal mines and landfills to report increased activities or signs of pollution and meet with representatives of the energy and enforcement spheres to "keep our fingers on the pulse of what's going on," Ann says.

One member alerted SOCM colleagues to proposed state legislation to decrease a stream buffer zone that protected waterways from mining and soil disturbance. Proponents argued that most of the waterways were tiny and that the buffer should be measured from the center of the streambed. SOCM showed that many were actually significant waterways whose environs deserved protection. Testimony from SOCM members convinced legislators to increase the effective zone by measuring 100 feet from the average high water mark.

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In another Tennessee county, a SOCM member saw a public notice from a coal company that sought the return of a reclamation bond. The bond guaranteed that the company would restore the mining site to its pre-mining condition. The SOCM member requested a site visit and submitted written comments to the bonding authority describing the incomplete reclamation process. As a result, the federal Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement denied the refund until the company completed the work.

In these and many other ways, SOCM's campaigns help build coalitions to protect coal communities from further environmental damage and make equitable economic transitions from the extractive industries.

Ann says, "Tennessee needs an organization like SOCM that helps families with all sorts of issues. Environmental justice is connected to social justice is connected to economic justice." 🌱

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—ANN LEAGUE

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MEMBER PROFILE 

Remembering Marvin Mich

CCHD remembers with gratitude the late Marvin Krier Mich, longtime CCHD diocesan director for the diocese of Rochester, NY. Marv died November 21, 2018, of pancreatic cancer. He was 70 years old.

“Marv was driven by his faith and a prayerful sense of justice and concern that all people be able to live with dignity,” recalls colleague Ruth Putnam Marchetti, diocesan social ministry coordinator. “Being CCHD diocesan director was such a perfect fit. He was so connected in the community, with interfaith efforts, unionizing, and with anyone doing poverty work. He was so good at organizing,” she says.

Marv, a Wisconsin native and former priest of the Diocese of Milwaukee, served as director of advocacy and parish social ministry at the Catholic Family Center in Rochester from 1999 until his death. He was academic dean and

associate professor of Christian ethics from 1982 to 1999 at St. Bernard's Institute (now St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry) in Rochester.

“Like many others in the diocese, I first met Marv (or ‘Dr. Mich’) when I took his class on Catholic social teaching at St. Bernard's Institute. It opened a whole new world of Catholic thought to me,” Ruth says. “I always think of him in the tradition of the labor priest. He carried that into the whole rest of his work: labor issues, just wages—it's a part of who he was.”

Ruth says Marv had incredible patience for the “grueling, slow work” of grassroots organizing, including “bringing people to the table, listening, and letting issues unfold.”

In recent years, Marv was concerned about the lack of a local, faith-based community organizing group. Ruth says he brought together from urban and suburban congregations “people who wanted to make a difference.” The grassroots RocACTS organization was created almost 10 years ago and has used grants from CCHD and others to accomplish its important work.

As CCHD director for the Diocese of Rochester, Marv “always had his antennae out” for community groups that could help ameliorate the poverty and inequities in Rochester, Ruth says. “He was a great teacher but an even better doer. And at every fundraising event, long after most people left, he was in the kitchen, washing dishes,” she remembers.

She says, “I think he was trying to do God's work here in the world in the time he had.”

Marv is survived by Kristine, his wife of 35 years, and by their two children and two grandchildren. 🌱

