

ORGANIZING COMMUNITIES TO PROTECT WEST VIRGINIA'S NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

OVEC (Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition)
Huntington, WV

"The survival of the Appalachian culture depends on the survival of the mountains themselves."

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SUMMARY: OVEC is a relatively small group that effectively takes on the most powerful industrial interests in West Virginia. Since 1987 **Janet Fout, Dianne Bady** (and their co-founder, the late Laura Forman), have organized Appalachian communities to **protect their air, water and mountains from being destroyed for oil, timber, coal** and other profitable enterprises. With research-grounded strategies, and bolstered by spirituality and heartfelt conviction, Bady, Fout and their colleagues pursue the following approaches:

- **Know the Opposition:** For a critical and ultimately successful campaign to oppose a paper mill, for example, OVEC studied the science, technology and economics before taking action.
- **Engage All Possible Allies:** By tapping into the local religious community, for instance, OVEC has been able counter portrayals of its efforts as "extremist."
- **Use Creative Actions:** With tactics like sending out scratch and sniff postcards to demonstrate how it would smell downwind of a proposed paper mill, Bady and Fout keep people engaged and energized.
- **Practice Radical Shared Leadership:** The organization engages the community members and institutions who are directly suffering or who are likely to suffer at the hands of polluters. They make individuals and organizations equal partners in brainstorming how to take on the opposition.

The following story is dedicated to Laura Forman, one of the three award recipients from OVEC. Laura collapsed while speaking at a protest that she organized against mountaintop removal and valley fill strip mining in November 2001, shortly after receiving the Leadership for a Changing World award with Dianne Bady and Janet Fout. In spite of her death, Laura's spirit continues to inspire OVEC's work in many ways, one of which is the creation of the Laura Forman Passion for Justice Award for budding activists.

A DIFFERENT POWER SOURCE

Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition

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They've been roughed up, ridiculed and written off. But those who have over the years underestimated the commitment of the activists who make up the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition—or who have tried to ignore, intimidate or marginalize them—have sooner or later learned it's not a group that can be easily dismissed.

Devoted to environmental causes in West Virginia since 1987, OVEC has proved itself to be a tough, capable and resourceful opponent of the big oil, chemical, timber and mining industries that dominate the Mountain State's economics and politics; interests and industries that have grown to view West Virginia as theirs to do with what they please for profit, whether it's filling the state's air with the toxic residue of oil refining, or tearing away mountaintops for coal. Yet OVEC has repeatedly proved that one small social justice organization can successfully take on interests that aren't only economically and politically powerful, but that have for generations dominated the identity of communities across West Virginia.

Finally standing up

OVEC has its roots in an oil spill in the mid-1980s, a spill that shut down virtually every municipal water supply plant along the Ohio River for about 200 miles. Dianne Bady, an environmental activist who had recently moved to West Virginia from Wisconsin, was a bit taken aback at the response of the local media to what was a clear ecological disaster wrought by a sloppy corporation. Instead of newspaper editorials decrying the company's negligence, says Bady, "the editorials were saying how wonderful it was that the president of the company went to the spill site and admitted it was their fault."

Bady wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper: "Excuse me, but where else could the oil have come from? Also, the holding tank was illegal; it didn't have a permit because it didn't meet the required standards. And the more the media here pats the company on the back rather than holding it accountable, the more often this sort of thing is going to happen."

Hers was uncommon behavior for a West Virginian, where residents were much more likely to accept such disaster as inevitable and regard it as impossible to fight given the industry's powerful grip on the state's power structure. "Many people here are afraid to get involved," says Larry Gibson, an activist with OVEC. "This is a poor state where people are economically and socially depressed and repressed."

But the letter clearly struck a nerve. A group of people who'd long suffered the downwind effects of the refinery's toxic air discharges contacted Bady and asked if she would meet with them and help them fight on the air pollution front. "So I went and talked to them. And it was so awful, the terrible pollution there. But I said, 'It's too much. I don't want to be involved in this.'" But Bady had a problem. Having seen the damage, having talked to the group, "I literally could not sleep at night because it bothered me so much. And so I got involved because it was the only way I could sleep at night." And a coalition was stirring.

The first fight

Bady, as a newcomer, was quickly learning that although residents may have been reluctant to speak out, there was a seething discontent in West Virginia with the way large corporations were treating the state. She also learned that the state didn't just suffer from a small handful of facilities doing damage here and there, but that in fact the state was under virtual environmental siege. In working on the campaign to rein in the oil refinery's smokestack emissions, Bady met and quickly joined forces with two other activists, Janet Fout—a native West Virginian—and Laura Forman. She met them just about the time that a new threat to the state's environment was looming on the horizon, a gigantic pulp mill scheduled to be built on the Ohio River near a small town called Apple Grove. While the coalition continued to work on the oil refinery air pollution issue (it would be resolved in 1998, after community activism led by OVEC resulted in the company paying out \$32.5 million in fines and remediation work) it turned its immediate attention to the pulp mill.

The paper mill battle would set the pattern for fights to come, fights that invariably drag on for years: Corporations eager to take advantage of the state's resources with little thought to the environmental consequences; government eager to accommodate them, including offering large subsidies and tax breaks along with promises of fast-track permits and even promises to loosen up state environmental law; communities split between those who viewed the issues in terms of jobs versus the environment and those who believed protecting the environment was really the key to West Virginia's economic and social future.

In taking on the pulp mill, OVEC would fall into its own pattern of response: learn everything possible about the opposition, tap into the power of the community most directly impacted, identify any and all possible allies and practice "radical shared leadership," the coalition's term for making everyone—from individuals to other organizations—equal partners in brainstorming over how to take on the opposition. OVEC followed one other action maxim, too, as it fashioned strategies for fighting specific battles: have a little fun while you're at it. "Like the post cards," says Elinore Taylor, a volunteer and board member with OVEC. "Someone had the idea of doing a scratch-and-sniff post card of what it would smell like downwind of the pulp mill." This idea was enthusiastically implemented by one of their coalition partners, the WV Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation. Tens of thousands of the postcards were mailed out.

After embarking on a crash course in the science, technology and economics of pulp mills, OVEC went on the offensive. It publicized the fact that the company refused to use the least-polluting bleaching technology, and that the Ohio River was already contaminated with illegal levels of dioxin. The bleaching method planned by the company would have spewed more dioxins into the already dioxin-laden waterway. It publicized the fact that the mill—in a state routinely on the brink of fiscal crisis—would be getting \$1 billion worth of subsidies and tax breaks. It publicized the fact that the company wouldn't commit to using West Virginians in the plant's construction. To rally protesters at the state capital, they reenacted Paul Revere's famous ride, only this time the horseback rider was shouting, "the pulp mill is coming!" And when company executives and government officials held a closed-door dinner meeting at Point Pleasant to discuss the project, OVEC held its own dinner outside, replete with dioxin-poisoned fish and glasses of polluted water. "It was pretty funny," says Fout. "And the media loved it," adds Bady. They put out fact sheets—the mill would require 10,000 trees a day to operate, which

raised the prospect of wholesale deforestation across the state. And their labor partners did the pungent post card mailing. Meanwhile, they signed up coalition partners, including veterans groups—themselves the victims of dioxin in the form of agent orange—and organized labor, which was concerned about the fact that the company building the mill wouldn't commit to using union employees to operate it. They also tapped into the local religious community. "Politicians were trying to paint us a little group of extremists," says Bady. "But then we got the Commission on Religion in Appalachia involved, and that made things very different."

It was a powerful mix of grassroots and inside lobbying, street theater, sophisticated analysis of the issues, savvy media relations, plain old hard work... and a little divine intervention now and again. After an initial campaign opposing the mill, the issue "faded into the background for a while," says Janet Fout—possibly due to a glut in the pulp market. OVEC focused its energies elsewhere and continued organizing citizens to demand greater enforcement at the oil refinery.

But Fout happened to be taking a trip up the river one day with a friend to look for eagles. Instead of eagles, they saw an archeological team working on the proposed pulp mill site. Fout had strong suspicions that the project was back on track. That same day, Fout learned from a contact at the State Division of Waste Management that the paper mill project was back on, and that the mill had applied for a fast-track landfill permit. The paper mill's and the state's hand tipped, OVEC went back to the full-court press. Finally, after four years of legal entanglements and strong citizen opposition led by OVEC, the state and pulp mill sent each other simultaneous faxes: the state withdrawing all permits and financial aid, the company bowing out of the project.

Synchronicity

"That sort of synchronicity seems to happen all the time," says Fout of the eagle incident, and the faxes, too. "And it feeds into our own sense that this is a spiritual issue, as well."

And to the coalition, there's no more spiritually powerful symbol in West Virginia than its mountains. Much of the state's cultural and environmental identity is wrapped up in its deep green, rolling and craggy hills. "All of us, since we were very, very young have felt a deep connection, a kind of spiritual connection to the natural world," write Bady, Fout and Laura Forman in explaining what has kept them going over the years. "The survival of the Appalachian culture depends on the survival of the mountains themselves."

But the mountains are—and have been for a while—under direct attack. As coalmining technology has shifted away from deep-hole mining to strip mining, the practice of mountaintop removal has gathered steam. Mountaintop removal involves literally removing entire mountaintops and then dumping the former mountaintops into adjacent stream valleys. So far in West Virginia, five hundred square miles of mountains have been removed and the residue dumped on top of 1,000 miles of stream. "Entire communities have disappeared," says OVEC, "after getting in the way of the 20 story-high mountain-leveling machines." It is destruction on an almost unimaginable scale, says Larry Gibson, who lives in an area devastated by coal mining. "In the past 16 years, they've destroyed over 430,000 acres of mountain, and we call ourselves 'The Mountain State.'"

Divine guidance and campaign reform

As the coalition looks to each new campaign, it's not always clear where they'll get the renewed energy to take on another fight, nor how they'll proceed, say activists. "I think it's because we're hooked into something bigger," says Fout. "A different power source. And sometimes we struggle and sometimes we don't know what to do next, don't have a clue. It's like walking in a fog, but something steers us; we call it God. But it allows you to work longer, to have the energy and to unleash the power of others. I mean if you're always focusing on yourself instead of others then eventually you're going to burn out."

It is spirituality that coalition members say they frequently draw on in waging their non-stop struggle against determined, wealthy, powerful and entrenched interests. But it doesn't mean they're incapable of doing the cold calculating necessary to win change. Which is why the most recent OVEC initiative involves tackling campaign finance in West Virginia. "There were articles in U.S. News and World Report and Newsweek about mountain top removal," says Elinore Taylor. "And I thought, all we have to do is show our state legislators those articles and things will change. But nothing changed, and it dawned on us that nothing was going to change until we changed the legislature."

But with coal money pouring into legislative campaigns, it is tough for any challenger to make it in state politics and so OVEC and its allies are currently pushing legislation that would offer public funding to qualified candidates in return for a pledge not to take special interest money. If the past is any indication, it will be another long, grinding campaign. If the past is any indication, it is also a campaign that OVEC will eventually win.

"We've developed an ability to trust that if we do the right things, if we are conscious of having integrity in our relationships with the people and other groups we work with, and we do that with love in our hearts, and even if we don't really know what the hell we're doing, it will work out," says Bady. It's perhaps not the most scientific prescription for organizational success, but it seems to be an ethic that works in a place—and arguably a world—where integrity and love and spirit are too often subsumed in the name of pure material gain. It has proved to be a powerful prescription for winning even the longest, most grinding fight.

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