

Visions from  
**Black Mountain**

*Benham, Lynch, and Cumberland Residents Reflect on  
Opportunities and Challenges*



**Winter 2010**

Kentuckians For The Commonwealth is a statewide grassroots, social justice organization of nearly 7,000 members. We believe that people can work together to build a better future, challenge and change injustice, and improve the quality of life for all Kentuckians. We support community people as they build effective organizations and develop skills to become involved in improving their community. Together, we win important issue campaigns.

We have a vision.

We are working for a day when Kentuckians-and all people-enjoy a better quality of life.

When the lives of people and communities matter before profits.

When our communities have good jobs that support our families  
without doing damage to the water, air, and land.

When companies and the wealthy pay their share of taxes and can't buy elections.

When all people have health care, shelter, food, education, and other basic needs.

When children are listened to and valued.

When discrimination is wiped out of our laws, habits, and hearts.

And when the voices of ordinary people are heard and respected in our democracy.

**This booklet is a project of the Harlan County Chapter of Kentuckians for the Commonwealth.** Chapter members spearheaded this effort to communicate to other community members and a wider audience the unique assets of Benham, Cumberland, and Lynch. We believe the Tri-Cities have a good foundation to build a better future on and that our greatest community asset is our people. Many wonderful people in this area, not just the folks in this booklet, have a vision for our community.



**The history of Kentucky is shaped by coal, the coal industry and especially by coal miners and other coal industry workers.** Today, coal is still an important part

of Kentucky's economy. But Harlan County Chapter Members and the rest of Kentuckians for the Commonwealth believe that if a block of coal cannot be mined without causing the physical, emotional, spiritual, and cultural destruction that we experience so often today, that block of coal should be left in the ground.

**Community members in this booklet share their concerns about how a “coal at any cost” mentality is compromising our ability to ensure a good quality of life for all Eastern Kentuckians and create a better future.** Obviously, coal is here today and it will be here tomorrow. But coal will not be here forever. Geologists, mining engineers, and energy economists debate the finer points of coal's future, but most agree – and most coal miners know – that most of the coal that can be mined easily and inexpensively in Eastern Kentucky has already been mined.

**Historically, coal miners were the economic backbone of their families, churches, and communities.** But in recent decades, coal miners' jobs have disappeared, even as coal production has remained strong. Coal companies mine more coal with bigger machines and more explosives – but fewer miners – every year. Kentucky owes coal miners and other coal industry workers our respect, gratitude, and – as the coal industry continues to change and shrink – alternatives to coal mining.

**We believe that a better future is possible in Eastern Kentucky.** We have much to be proud of and to build on including skilled workers, resilient communities, natural beauty, valuable resources such as mountains, forests, and water, and a rich culture. But we must be smart to create a just and prosperous future, and it won't happen if we continue to allow the coal industry to control the economy and wipe out our land, water, homes, and communities.

Harlan County Chapter Members hope this booklet will inspire you to think about what you want to see in the Tri-Cities area and to encourage you to connect with your neighbors to make that vision a reality. KFTC members believe in the power of citizens working together to challenge injustices, right wrongs and improve the quality of life for all Kentuckians.

## Benny Massey, Lynch

I was born in 1949 and grew up in Lynch. All my family worked in the coal mines, so I asked my old man to get me a job in the mines. I always tell this story: When I started, I said I was gonna work a few days and then leave town and go to the big city. I ended up working 30 years in the coal mines.

In 1972 I got elected to Lynch City Council and I've been on the council at least 16 terms. I'm a deacon at Greater Mount Sinai Baptist Church. I'm sort of an all-around man in the community – everybody knows me.



I love this place. Lynch, Kentucky—it's home. It's a good place to raise your kids, and a good place to live. A lot of people who have moved away from here would love to come back. We can build a strong community for them to come home to.

I think we have a lot going for us in the Tri-Cities. We've got a reservoir of good water here and we can supply a lot of counties with our water. Black Mountain is the highest peak in Kentucky and we've got the Portal 31 Exhibition Coal Mine.

**I want to see Lynch, Benham and Cumberland working together as one. This is my outlook: that we can come together to prosper all three cities. We'll be better off if we work together.**

I think it's time we combine our water, sewer and garbage. This would save the older people a lot of money. We can't keep raising rates on these folks who are on a fixed income. We also need to improve our housing so folks who want to return can find a place to live.

And we have to protect our mountains. Beautiful mountains, beautiful scenery – why destroy that? I mined coal for 30 years and we never destroyed our resources here.

We can mine coal safely and responsibly. And we need to create some new industries in this area besides coal. I still say this can be a thriving town. A lot can be offered here if we just concentrate on it and work as one.

## Carl Shoupe, Benham

I was blessed to be born and raised in Lynch, Kentucky. I've lived here in Harlan County all my life except when I was serving as a Marine in Vietnam. I enjoy telling folks that I live on the banks of Looney Creek, just down the road from where I was born.

I'm a third generation coal miner. My granddad worked underground over near Evarts. I followed him into the mines, but before long a rock fall ended my mining career. Later, I spent about 15 years working for the UMWA as an international organizer; worked from Canada to Australia but mostly here in Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia.

My son – a fourth generation coal miner – works in the mines today. He's a top-notch coal miner, one of the best in his company. But coal mining's not like it used to be, and everyone knows it's on the way out. I'm not looking for my grandsons to be fifth generation coal miners.

I believe that today, right now, we have the best chance we've had in generations to create a new economy here in Eastern Kentucky with more jobs, better jobs, and healthy communities. It's time to start a transition to a new energy economy here in Kentucky, and I'm determined to help make it happen.

**It's well documented that Appalachia was the energy leader of the 20th century. There's no reason we can't be the leader of the next energy economy.**

Our people should be building solar panels and wind turbines. We've earned the right to have a place at the front of the new energy economy, but to take our place there we've got to make better choices.

This community of Benham and Lynch could be an example for all of Appalachia. Many of us are working to create a better future for our children and grandchildren – and we've got lots of possibilities and real ideas about how to do that. We've got a bright future if we want it.

But that bright future is threatened by the worst elements and old habits of the coal industry. They want to open up five new mines up and down this holler that would likely destroy our water, our roads, our day-to-day way of life, and our hopes for the future. Coal mining is going to be around for a while yet here in the mountains. It's part of our history and our present. But the industry is about played out, and we can't let it rob us of our future. We've got to make better choices, build something new for the future.



## Wanda Humphrey, Benham

My father was a postmaster, paperhanger, and painter for the coal company and even ran the water plant for some time. After I grew up and got married, I lived away from Benham for a while. We were living in Tulsa when I was pregnant with my son, and I came home to Benham when I was about five months along so my son could be born at the Benham Hospital.

I have wonderful memories of growing up in Benham. I worked at a cancer hospital in Houston for 27 years and I'd tell them stories about Benham and they just couldn't believe there was such a place.



Wanda Humphrey bottom left

This was called the Cadillac of coal camps. There were people from Cumberland that sent their children to school here in Benham. They had to pay, but we had the best teachers. We had the best doctors.

I've always loved these mountains. I've been over every square inch of every mountain you can see here – from the top to the bottom. I used to run up and down these mountains. We'd go sleigh riding, take hayrides, have weenie roasts. We were poor, but we had more fun than anyone.

What they're doing to the mountains is what makes me so upset. I just don't understand people that want to destroy this. It's money; it's greed. How can they ruin this place?

I served three terms on the Benham City Council and during that time we worked hard to restore some of our old buildings. We had in mind cottage industries like quilting, apple butter, things like that. And we had big plans for the theater.

But now people aren't as involved in improving our community or planning for the future. People should go to the city council meetings, the power board meetings, to know what's going on. But people are busy.

**I believe our community can be what it once was and what we once dreamed for it. It's gonna happen. This town's been here too long and there's too many good people here.**

## Rutland Melton, Lynch

I was born and raised in Lynch. I worked for 23 years in the coal mines and now I'm retired.

On Memorial Day weekend, I saw a lot of friends at the Eastern Kentucky Social Club reunion. They grew up around here and they were glad to be back home. They liked being able to let their kids play outside and ride bikes, which they can't do in the cities where they live.

A lot of the reunion folks visited Portal 31 Exhibition Coal Mine. Even though their fathers were coal miners, some had never seen the inside of a coal mine. When they took the tour, they were excited.



## **There's nothing like home. This is the place where a lot of people I grew up with want to come back to.**

Lynch is the perfect place to raise a child. You know the old saying, "It takes a village to raise a child"? When I was raised here, everybody was like family. You could leave your doors open, go to Cumberland, come back, and everything was the same.

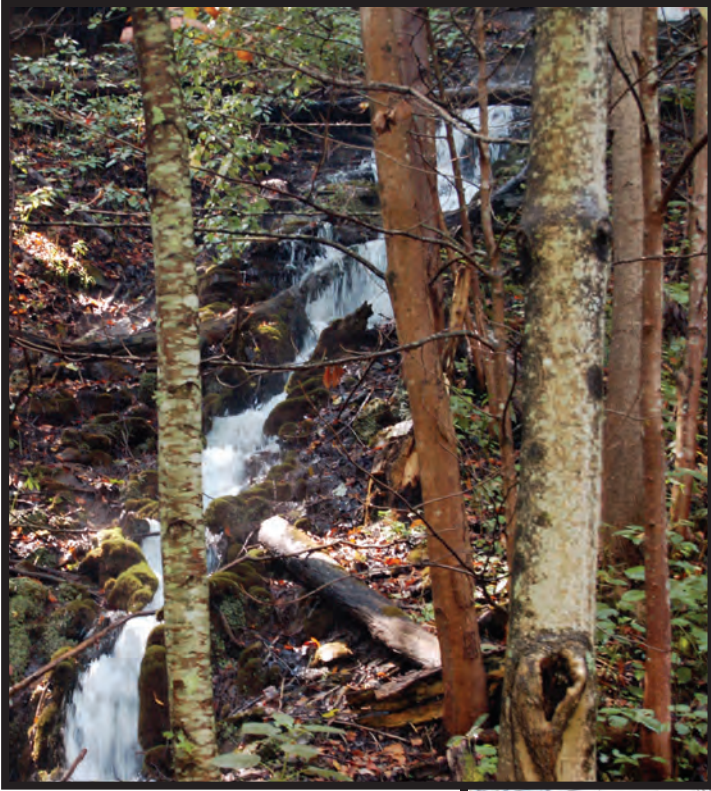
And this is the perfect place for a retired person. You don't have all the noise like you have in the city. It's quiet, peaceful, and calm.

If we could renovate all these old houses and build a few more, we'd have a place for working folks and retired people to settle. We've even talked about making one of the houses a demonstration project for clean energy.

But none of our plans mean anything if we destroy our mountains. At the reunion I talked to my old friends about mountaintop removal. They do not want these mountains removed. Their children have never been in the mountains, so when they come here they're excited. It's something for them to see that they've never seen. If you destroy it, there won't be any need for them to come home. All the beauty will be gone.

I'm not against coal mining. I was a coal miner myself. There's a proper way to do the mining. Mountaintop removal is just a cheap way of mining, to me. They can get that coal without destroying these mountains.

# Our People



# Our Community





# Our Town



# Our Home

## **Kali Nolan, Cumberland** **Age 12**

I'm in 6th grade at Cumberland Elementary School.

I like to hunt and fish and trap with my papaw. I like spending time with my papaw and being in the woods where it's so quiet and peaceful. And I love animals – I just don't like to shoot 'em. Usually I turn away when he shoots 'em.

I don't like mountaintop removal because it destroys most of the mountains – that's less animals, so it's less animals to trap. And you don't have many woods left, so when you go hunting and fishing most of the smoke and stuff destroys the air and water and most of the fishes. I think if they keep on doing the mountaintop removal, there won't be that many mountains left, or that many trees left.



**I want to be a veterinarian. But I don't know if I want to work around here because of all these coal trucks that run up and down the road. I might want to live around here if there weren't so many coal trucks. They go so fast, and you get so scared when you're driving. They get so close and they barely stop.**

Most of my family lives here, so if I lived here I'd be around my family a lot more. I wouldn't have to travel a long time to get to my family. I like my church a lot, too. I sing up front with my friends. I wouldn't want to leave them.

## Elmer Lloyd, Cumberland

I've been here for all my life. I'm a former coal miner, on disability now.

I bought my property down here in 1982 and in 1985 I became disabled. I built my pond. I grew some blackberries, strawberries. I used to like to go lake fishing, but after I hurt my back it's hard to do a lot of traveling.

I wanted to build a pond for my grandkids and kids to have something to do. Then the mines did some damage to it. I argued with them a few years and they finally decided to fix it. Paid me some money to fix it. I'm working on it now, and got it fairly well restored.



**I'd like to see us create new opportunities for young people to live and work in the mountains. If we had other jobs besides coal in the community, maybe more of our kids would stay here.**

The way it is now, they haven't got a choice – they either work in the coal mines or they move out. I've got a daughter that lives in Knoxville, Tennessee and she's a respiratory therapist. She makes more money than coal miners make, and I don't think that's right because the coal miners ought to make good money. They used to when they had unions.

We also have to stop destroying our mountains. We have beautiful mountains, beautiful scenery, and nice people. I know everything can't be the way you want it, but if we don't think about the future pretty quick, it's going to be too late to back up and correct it. Once the scenery's destroyed and people have gone from here, it'll be too late.

I know a country needs coal, but let's go about it in the best way, with the least destruction. If we destroy the country now and then come up with a better source of power 30 years from now, we're gonna say, "Why didn't we do this first?"

## Diane Marsili, Lynch

I've been alive more than 57 years, and I've always gotten along with people around here. I'm definitely a coal miner's daughter and granddaughter, and I'm proud of that. I wouldn't be what I am today without them and their support.

They used to mine coal so much they won prizes for breaking the record from yesterday and another record from the day before. We'd get jackets and coolers and, let's see, we got a thermos and we got a clock and we got this thing with coins on it that says "Arch." All the men just wanted to work. Now we don't have unions and the coal companies want to mine all around us.



I just don't know why they have to come into Lynch and mine under our town. It's not like there are no other mountains around here. Why do they have to come right into town and destroy the water table so everybody has to leave? They want to destroy our water for that seam of coal.

They say they'll truck us water in. How am I gonna wash my hair out of a truck? Can I get in the back of the truck and swim? That's not gonna work. I don't understand how smart people can come up with ridiculous stuff like that. It's because money's the bottom line.

Those stickers I see that say "If you don't like coal, don't use electricity" make me want to get a T-shirt that says, "I like coal, but I love water better."

**The thing is none of those people that do all this mess live here. They do the mess and leave and then we get to look at it. The company used to care about what happened around here. They don't now.**

I think we ought to be putting more money in here to find better ways. I think there's alternatives. Where my swing sits, in the summer you can sit there and the wind is like "shhhhhh," going right through there. I've wondered about wind power. You know, those windmills work a lot of places.

I've got coal in my blood, but I'm a mountain girl, too. It's hard to think about it being gone.

## Stanley Sturgill, Lynch

I was born at the Benham Hospital. I'm a retired coal miner and federal mine inspector with 41 years of service to the coal industry.

During the latter part of my working years in coal mining, especially as an inspector, I got to visit a lot of different mines, not only underground but also surface mines. It was only when I really started seeing how this surface mining was done that I really, just plain and simple, got torn up about it.



I got to see first hand how these mountains are destroyed by mountaintop removal. They can move just about a whole mountain with one shot. And with every shot they take they're destroying the streams that run off these mountains – water for us to drink.

Here in Lynch, we have one water source and that's Looney Creek. Looney Creek supplies Lynch and Benham with water out of underground reservoirs at Lynch, where Looney Creek and Gap Branch are pumped into the reservoirs. A lot of people depend on this water:

Looney Creek runs off of Black Mountain. The ridge of Black Mountain is protected from mining. But there's all this other territory, all around Lynch and all around Benham, all the way to Cumberland, that is under permit right now, waiting to be approved, so they can surface mine it. This is going to destroy Looney Creek.

We have good things happening right now in Benham and Lynch and we don't want to jeopardize our future.

The cities of Cumberland, Benham, and Lynch have joined together in an "interconnect" program to connect our water and sewer systems. If this mountaintop removal mining or strip mining takes place, all this will be lost. We have a wonderful tourist attraction in Lynch, Portal 31 Exhibition Coal Mine. If they blast above Portal 31, no one will insure it for tourists to go underground. We have a lot of old buildings that are on the National Registry of Historic Places, and these will also be affected by blasting. If we can keep the Kentucky side of Black Mountain intact, we can have ATV trails and offer tourists another reason to visit our community. Black Mountain is considered one of the 11 Most Endangered Historic Places in the United States by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

**We're trying to hold on to what we have and create a future for our children and grandchildren. I don't think these coal companies have a right to take that away from us.**

## Betty Howard, Benham

My father was born here in 1916 and on his 40th birthday he moved the family back here. I graduated from Benham High School in 1958. I've served 43 years in one capacity or another for the city of Benham.

My family has a long connection with the coal industry. My grandfather was one of the people that helped International Harvester/Wisconsin Steel open up the coal mines here. And both my father and husband have been coal miners.

I served as mayor of Benham for 13 years and, before that, I was city clerk for many years and served on the city council. Because Benham and Lynch

were two of the oldest coal camps in the mountains, we wanted to get the local buildings on the historic register and make our community a historic destination. Gail Lawson, who's now deceased, and several other people worked together in the 1980s and we were the first town in Harlan County to have a project like this. Coal Miners' Memorial Park – that's hallowed ground to me because we all pitched in and did it together.

Now we also have Benham School House Inn, the Kentucky Coal Mining Museum and Portal 31 Exhibition Coal Mine.

**But how are we going to build on that work to create jobs and revive our economy? We're eager to have jobs, which is important, and we're eager to have some sort of industry. But cutting all the timber and strip mining is one sure way of putting the last nail in the coffin for Benham and Lynch because we're subject to destroy our water reservoir. I can live pretty good without a lot of things – water's not one of them.**

I'd like to see us get the historic theater going and build the clubhouse back. We need to give visitors a reason to spend the night at Benham School House Inn. I'd like to see the hospital renovated, and I think we need an outreach clinic for the veterans so they don't have to travel to Virginia. And a study a few years ago indicated our pure water might be a good fit for a water bottling plant.

Economic development is everyone's responsibility. We're going to have to come together and say, "Okay, it's not that you're against me, just what can I do to help?" And if somebody offers to help you should be able to say, "Come on board." It doesn't matter who you are, what your status in life is, or what you can do. Everybody can do something.



Betty Howard top right

## Appalachian Transition Initiative

Appalachian Transition is devoted to ideas for a more just, sustainable and prosperous future in Central Appalachia. We are at a critical moment in our region. The time has arrived to talk about the coming transition of our economy, workforce and communities. Across this region, people are doing just that. Small, local businesses are popping up in communities across Appalachia as a result.



### Residential Energy Efficiency

#### **People's Self Help Housing - Lewis County, KY**

Nelson & Dorothy Plummer lived in their home the entire 47 years of their married life and raised their twin daughters there. The old house was built on rocks from the creek nearby and the lumber came from a small sawmill just up the hollow. Over the years, the old house started to literally come apart at the seams. Utility bills for January, February and March reached \$1,300 - 40% of their monthly Social Security income. This year, People's Self-Help Housing built a new Energy Star home on the site of the Plummer's homeplace. Total utility expenses for their new home are expected to be less than \$850 per year, saving thousands of dollars and keeping everyone warm.



### Sustainable Agriculture

#### **Central Appalachian Farmers Enterprise - Rogersville, TN**



This group of local farmers have worked over the last two years to form a local foods distribution cooperative. They are now supplying local restaurants with farm fresh food, educating each other, and making a living at the same time. The cooperative also aims to deliver local produce to area schools soon. The farmers involved have chosen to run their operations with sustainable energy sources and will be purchasing a bus that runs on biodiesel and using solar panels for their distribution center's energy.

### Kentucky Arts and Crafts

#### **Pine Mountain - Letcher County Craft Co-op - Whitesburg, KY**

Browse through the aisles of the Pine Mountain-Letcher County Craft Co-op and you'll see items such as intricately carved wooden figurines, cornhusk dolls of all sizes, and handcrafted cabinets and bookshelves. "We're really proud of our crafts," says Ruth Shackelford, a founding member of the Co-op and one of 45 artisans who volunteer their time to run the store in Whitesburg, Kentucky. The group began working 15 years ago to promote local crafts and create a sustainable business in which to sell them. With community support, they are succeeding!



**Join the conversation at [www.appalachiantransition.org](http://www.appalachiantransition.org).**

*Supported by Kentuckians For The Commonwealth and  
Mountain Association For Community Economic Development.*

The Harlan County KFTC Chapter is one of the largest chapters in Eastern Kentucky.  
We meet on the first Thursday of every month at 6 pm.

Our communities are stronger when people get involved.  
We'd love to have your participation and ideas. Come join us!



Stop by our next meeting,  
Visit our website at [www.kftc.org](http://www.kftc.org), or  
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