

Adventures of a Student Advocate

By Beth Coleman, Berea College

Frederick Douglas said, “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.” Being a native of eastern Kentucky, I’ve always been concerned with the struggle to overcome poverty that people in eastern Kentucky face on a daily basis. I grew up knowing that the only way to achieve progress in Appalachia is through education, economic growth, and civic engagement. Before college, I struggled to understand why these elements were lacking in my community. It just didn’t add up--how could my community be afflicted with so much violence, drug abuse, unemployment, environmental degradation, and hopelessness when our state is so abundant with natural and human resources?

In 2005, I enrolled at Berea College. Founded in 1855 as the first interracial and coeducational college in the South, Berea charges no tuition and admits only academically promising students, primarily from Appalachia, who have limited economic resources. Berea students are required to work at least 10 hours per week in a variety of positions coordinated by Berea’s labor program. Through this program, I was able to work at Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC), Kentucky’s largest and oldest grassroots political organization. I selected the internship because of KFTC’s work with economic development in eastern Kentucky. During my internship, I learned about mountaintop removal mining and the role the coal industry played in our state politics. Mountaintop removal mining involves clear cutting native hardwood forests, using dynamite to blast away as much as 800-1000 feet of mountaintop, and then dumping the waste into nearby valleys. People near mining sites are forced to breathe airborne dust and debris and drink water that has been contaminated by chemicals including arsenic.

In the past few years, I researched my own family’s relationship with coal mining. I discovered that up until the year I was born, my own county had several underground and surface mines that employed members of my family. During conversations with my family, I learned that my grandmother used to accompany my great-grandfather into the mines as a child because she was smaller and could reach coal seams he couldn’t reach. I learned that coal paid for my uncles to attend school. I learned about the coal severance taxes that coal companies paid to the state for economic development and reclamation in the areas where they operate and how these funds



Beth Coleman (left) and Carol Browner, Assistant to the President for Energy and Climate Change in the Obama Administration, meeting in the White House in April 2009 to discuss mountaintop removal coal mining in Appalachia. Beth utilized a grant from Project Pericles™ to fund her trip to Washington to meet Ms. Browner and other environmental leaders.

were being diverted back to coal-companies through state grants to subsidize mountaintop removal. My internship allowed me to see firsthand the corruption of our politicians and how this system for years had been draining the hope of Kentuckians and thus, our faith in our government.



A mountain in Kentucky that was destroyed by mountaintop removal.

In 2008, Professor Billy Wooten, my advisor at Berea College, told me about a legislative proposal competition being sponsored by Project Pericles, an organization in New York that works with colleges and universities from across the United States to increase civic engagement. The proposal encouraged teams of undergraduates to prepare original legislative proposals on critical public policy issues facing the United States. The winning team would receive a \$4,000 award that could be used to fund advocacy and education activities including lobbying trips and education workshops. Working with other students

from Berea, we prepared a legislative proposal entitled “*Coal-to-Liquid and Coal-to-Gas: Repeal of the Federal Funding for CTL/CTG Production.*” Our proposal would place a moratorium on any new or additional federal government funding of coal-to-liquid plant construction until such time that carbon sequestration technology is adequately researched and made available at the commercial level.

In March, we found out that our proposal was selected as one of the six semi-finalists and that we would be going to a conference in New York City to present our proposal to a “legislative committee” consisting of former U.S. Senators Nancy Kassebaum Baker, Bob Kerrey, and Harris Wofford. In early April 2008, we flew to New York to attend the event. During the hearing, we had five minutes to present our proposal followed by 15 minutes to answer questions from the committee.

At the end of the hearing, the Senators met to decide the winner. While we thought we had done pretty well, we didn’t think that we would be selected as the winning team. At dinner that night, President Richard Guarasci of Wagner College announced to a roomful of people that Berea College had won the competition. We were so excited!!! Mountaintop removal poisoned more than the land and the water--it poisoned the people through actual disease and the infection of hopelessness. Winning the Debating for Democracy grant would help us find the antidote to that poison.



Students from Berea College present their legislative proposal to (from l. to r.) former U.S. Senators Bob Kerrey (D-NE), Nancy Kassebaum Baker (R-KS), and Harris Wofford (D-PA) at the 2008 D4D National Conference.

After we won the award, I spent a good deal of time meeting with Jan Liss, the Executive Director of Project Pericles, and Dave Rippon, the Assistant Director of Project Pericles, to develop an education plan that would focus on bringing national attention to the issue of mountaintop removal. After developing the plan in the fall of 2008, we rolled out a series of activities in the spring of 2009.

- I attended state-wide events sponsored by Kentuckians for the Commonwealth to assess and investigate the problems related to mountaintop removal in these communities.
- In December 2008, I went to the Project Pericles Presidents Council meeting in New York to meet with Periclean college presidents and had an opportunity to discuss my plan with them.
- Working in conjunction with Professor Billy Wooten from Berea College, we developed a course, Organizational Communications, which requires students to produce a media campaign centered on raising awareness of how the coal mining practice known as mountaintop removal affects not only the environment but also local communities and individuals. This course is being offered this semester at Berea. Materials produced in this class will be distributed to other Periclean campuses to raise awareness of mountaintop removal.
- In March 2009, Berea students travelled to Allegheny College, Occidental College, Pitzer College, Swarthmore College, and other colleges and universities in Kentucky to meet with students, faculty, and staff to educate them about mountaintop removal. We let them know about the economic situation in the region; the conditions of poverty created by mountaintop removal mining; and the devastating health effects. By framing these situations in human terms, we were able to connect with students in a much more tangible way. We also discussed the role of politics and its role as an impediment to the issue and as a vehicle for change. We felt that we successfully made them aware of their unique ability to change the situation.

The highlight of the spring was a lobbying trip to Washington, DC. In April 2009, two students from Allegheny College (Sam Rigotti and Megan Sullivan) and five students from Berea College (Ken Johnson, Triston Jones, Sean Owsley, Jamoria Reed and I) spent five days speaking to Members of Congress and their staffs, senior staff in the Obama Administration, and leaders of environmental advocacy organizations about legislation that would end mountaintop removal. During the week, we participated in a number of meetings:

- I met with Carol Browner, the Assistant to the President for Energy and Climate Change, at the White House. We discussed the intricacies of Capitol Hill, my impressions of the legislative process, and the devastating health, economic, and environmental effects of mountaintop removal. I urged her to ask the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to put a moratorium on new mountaintop removal permits until the EPA can conduct a more intense internal review of their policies and the environmental effects of those operations. I told Ms. Browner about 5 year-old Makayla Urias who can't drink the water in her own

home because watersheds in her home of Pikeville, KY have more than 108 times the EPA maximum of arsenic in them. The arsenic pollution was caused by mountaintop removal. At the end of our meeting, Ms. Browner offered to set-up a meeting for me at the Council for Environmental Quality, the White House office that oversees mountaintop removal.

- Our group met with Mary Anne Hitt, the Director of the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal Campaign and JW Randolph, a lobbyist for Appalachia Voices.
- Ken Johnson and I spent an hour with former U.S. Senator Harris Wofford, one of the foremost public servants in the United States. Senator Wofford told us about his involvement in creating the Peace Corps and other stories from his distinguished career. Meeting one of the foremost public servants in the United States was a very honorable experience for us.
- Our group divided into teams and met with 4 Senators or their staff and 4 House of Representatives members or their staff. During our visits, we urged them to support Senate Bill 696 or House Bill 1310. These bills would restrict mountaintop removal. We met with Representative Jason Altmire (D-PA), Senator Robert Casey (D-PA), Representative Ben Chandler (D-KY), Representative Geoff Davis (R-KY), Senator Jim Demint (R-SC), Representative Hank Johnson (D-GA), Senator Carl Levin (D-MI), and Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY).

This summer, I will be working at an organization in Washington, DC that will allow me to continue my efforts to stop mountaintop removal mining. I am so thankful for the support of my friends and mentors at Berea College and Project Pericles and will continue to keep them updated on my future work.



Megan Sullivan (l) and Sam Rigotti (r) from Allegheny College meeting with Congressman Jason Altmire (D-PA) to discuss mountaintop removal.