

Health, Wellness, and the Arts at Appalachian State University

I'm very glad to be here...thank you so much. I lived and worked in the coalfields from 1973 until 1998 and my ties are to the mountains. Most of my work was with Appalshop, the media cooperative, in Whitesburg Kentucky. I'm going to share some clips from that work.

I wanted to begin with a piece of archival film that I used in a documentary about the 1989-90 Pittston strike. This was a strike about health care. The clip also is fine art. John L. Lewis is at least as great as any Shakespearian actor.

Play John L. Lewis clip 2 min.

Here's a quote from a French philosopher, Alain Badiou, just to seal the deal between us for the evening because often people don't think of documentary film as art and in fact, see politics and art as contradictory.

Alain Badiou says "Only art restores the dimension of the senses to an encounter, a resurrection, or a riot."

Every film I've made has some reference to health and wellness. So many things that bring profit for the few are directly connected with violence on the bodies and minds of men, women, and children in the region. Sometimes that violence comes from the lack of occupational health and safety. Sometimes from overwhelming poverty. Frequently from toxic damage by resource extraction to water and land.

I want to tell you a little about the United Mineworkers Health and Retirement Fund – I'm a beneficiary as the surviving spouse of a union coal miner. I also received expressions of concern and advocacy for vaccination throughout the pandemic from the Fund -- which I found remarkable.

I think it's important to remember that nothing happens without a collective demand. Lewis had expressed the demand of thousands of coal miners and their families who had organized at great risk to both life and livelihood.

In 1946, the UMWA Health and Retirement Fund was created in an agreement between the union and the government after the union threatened another strike.

The Mineworkers had demanded a 10-cent royalty on each ton of coal mined, and with that money as a start, they went through the coalfields gathering men who had been paralyzed from injuries in the mines and offering rehabilitation. The UMWA built hospitals in the coalfields that became nationally known. I remember seeing John L.'s photo in the lobby of one in Kentucky. There was a model for public health care that was comprehensive, accessible, and affordable.

Unfortunately, the Fund was still based on corporations and as the mine owners busted the union, access to health care declined. The Mud Creek Clinic in Floyd County, Kentucky, was organized by the East Kentucky Welfare rights organization with a remarkable working class, formerly abused woman, Eula Hall in leadership. Eula died in 2021 at age 93. We made a film about her and the clinic in the mid 80's. I've pulled several clips.

2. Play Mud Creek Clinic clip 2 minutes LOWER the volume

I want to return to the mineworkers but now to a struggle around health care in 1989-90. We are about 50 miles from the site of the Pittston strike. Do you remember it? Gail Gentry begins and ends the film. He was paralyzed in one of Pittston's mines.

3. Play Justice in the Coalfields first clip 2 minutes

There were 4000 civil disobedience arrests during the strike. There was a Solidarity campground that attracted union members from across the country. Union cooks from the Greenbrier Inn came down to make food. It was wonderful. The film took forever to finish and so I got to see past the victory.

Technically the miners won the strike with a new contract. Disabled miners, retirees, and widows still have their health care through the Fund. Elaine Purkey, wife of a Pittston miner who sings at the end died of Covid in a West Virginia hospital. As for the corporate history, Pittston already was responsible for the Buffalo Creek Flood that killed 125 people. They sold out all their mines to Alpha which merged with Massey, and were charged \$27.5 by the Justice Department and EPA for environmental damage and corruption. Alpha went into bankruptcy in 2015, emerged as a private company, and is still with us. And there's lots more. (There's a rally this weekend at the site to prevent a toxic landfill in Cleveland, VA)

4. Play Justice in the Coalfields second clip 2 minutes

When we look at health and wellness in Appalachia, we need, not only a critique of the misery inflicted by land grabbers, international corporations, big pharmaceuticals, exploitive private doctors, a neglectful government. We also need the inspiration of collective demands on the corporations that exploit labor and extract resources from the region, and we need to fight for a government that cares about community health and well-being. These demand long-term organizing of working class and poor people with depth, dignity, and creativity. Film and other forms of media are only part of that work but bring our senses to bear on struggle. It's work like yours in public health that leads the struggle.