

Photovoice participants capture their W.Va. communities in images

By [Sara Busse](#)

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Maryland native Shannon Bell worked in the Mountain State for several years before heading to Oregon for graduate school. The images of Southern West Virginia stayed in her mind and tugged at her heart, urging her to come back to West Virginia to capture these images in some form.

That form is Photovoice. In September 2008, Bell gave digital cameras to 40 women from five communities in Southern West Virginia and asked them to take pictures to tell the story of their communities.

Each group met monthly for eight months to share their photographs, discuss common themes, create "photo stories" (photographs with written narratives), and develop project ideas to address problems they identified. Bell participated in the meetings, giving the women guidelines to organize their photographs and stories.

"I'm just so moved by these stories," Bell said. "The issues just dig deep into your heart."

A selection of 100 photos and accompanying stories will be presented Wednesday through April 19 in an exhibit at the Clay Center. An opening reception will be held 5 to 9 p.m. Friday, and several of the photographers will be present.

Many of the women identified problems within their community, and the project empowered them to visit their lawmakers to discuss the problems as well as to offer solutions and suggestions for community development.



ABOVE: Karen Hartman's "Winter Glow" is part of the Harts Area section of the Southern West Virginia Photovoice Project.

BELOW: "Take Time to Smell the Leaves," by Debbie Santonia, depicts fall leaves beside the road on Williams Mountain.



"It's a neat way to communicate with policymakers," Bell explained of the Photovoice project. "It's empowering to the local people, as they got to say what their problems are instead of some outsider coming in and telling them."

"Photographs elicit a visceral reaction," Bell said. "The pictures impressed the legislators more than just facts and figures."

Joanne Frame, 59, and her daughter-in-law Tammy learned that firsthand. They took photographs of the deteriorating roads in Boone County.

"I was always so backward and all, but this encouraged me to speak up. I wanted to show the beauty of Boone County but wanted to show things that weren't so pretty, like the roads," Frame said. The Frames set up appointments with Delegate Ralph Rodighiero and Sen. Ron Stollings.

"These photo stories and Joanne and Tammy's visit made quite an impression on these two legislators," Bell said. "The roads in that area had not been paved in over 25 years. The next day, as a temporary fix, the crews started patching the roads that Tammy, Joanne and others had photographed." More permanent work is planned.

"I felt that we really accomplished something that day," Frame said. "I thought, 'Well, they'll just forget us,' but they've kept in contact, and they've called me several times." Stollings called Frame last week to let her know a 6-mile stretch of W.Va. 85, one of the worst roads the women photographed, was to be totally repaved this summer.



This valuable, 7-ounce piece of ginseng found in Mingo County caught the eye of Photovoice participant Aimee Colegrove.

The Photovoice project is a labor of love for Bell, one that allowed her to fulfill a dream to return in West Virginia, if only for a short time.

"I first came to West Virginia during the summer of 1999, as an intern with the Shepherd Program at Washington & Lee University. I did an eight-week AmeriCorps placement at Cabin Creek Health Center and really fell in love with West Virginia," Bell said.

Following her college graduation in 2000, Bell went to work for the Cabin Creek Health Center with the West Virginia Rural Health Education Partnerships, organizing the community around public health issues. She conducted a similar Photovoice project in Cabin Creek in 2003. She got a graduate degree from West Virginia University's Charleston campus while working at Cabin Creek Health Center, and she's currently a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Oregon in Eugene, Ore.

Bell arranged for the Health Center to act as fiscal agent for her Photovoice project, receiving grants from the Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation, and the West Virginia Development Office. Other contributors include the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, University of Oregon Sociology Department, Photographic Production Services, and the Clay Center for the Arts and Sciences.

Many of the participants voiced concerns about the environment. Kathy Stout expressed her fears about a coal mine's slurry injection site behind her house in Cabin Creek. Jane Linville took photos of fish she believes are toxic, caught in a stream near her home in Pond Fork.

Maria Lambert, part of the Big Coal River Photovoice group, used her photos and stories to communicate her community's water contamination problems. She lives on Prenter Road in Boone County.

Women from all five community groups took photos of litter along the roadsides and in popular dumping spots in their areas.

"They would like to see the Legislature pass a bottle deposit [law] because they feel that it would help clean up their communities," Bell said. "Every time a participant created a photo story dealing with their desire for a bottle deposit, I printed it off and gave it to them so that they could mail it to the governor and to their legislators. Many of them also called or e-mailed their legislators about the need for a bottle deposit."



Photovoice photographer Crystal Carter's "Please Pass the Bottle Bill" shows the debris that accumulate on the banks of Little Harts Creek after a rain.

The exhibit runs Wednesday through April 19 at the Clay Center for the Arts and Sciences of West Virginia. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday; One Clay Square; www.theclaycenter.org, 304-561-3570.

Reach Sara Busse at sara.busse@wvgazette.com or 304-348-1249.