



## Photos voice the feelings nine women have for Lenore

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by JULIA ROBERTS GOAD Staff Writer  
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(Photos Submitted) From the beautiful mountains (left) to the troubled water (above), a group of Lenore area women used photos to show how they felt about their community and what changes are needed.

LENORE —Appalachian people say they feel the area is sometimes portrayed as a place of poverty, ignorance and isolation, stereotypes and perceptions, reinforced by the media. A graduate student from Frederick, Maryland, has given some women from Southern West Virginia the opportunity to control how they are perceived by the rest of the world.

Shannon Bell is a graduate student at the University of Oregon, working toward her PhD in sociology. She attended WVU and lived in the state for five years, and has never forgotten her experiences.

“I moved out to Oregon in 2005 but kept West Virginia in my heart and wanted to do something for my dissertation that would bring me back here,” Bell said. “That’s why I decided to do this project here instead of out in Oregon.”

The project is her dissertation, a collection of photographs and stories, collectively titled Photovoice. The concept was to give digital cameras to 40 women in five communities in

Southern West Virginia, and let them take the photographs of the strengths and weaknesses of their communities, along with the day-to-day pictures of the people and places in their lives. The groups met each month to share their photographs, discuss common themes and create “photostories,” photographs with written narratives.

Bell started the project in September of 2008 by finding women who wanted to be involved.

“I spoke at Freedom United Baptist Church,” she said. “I made a short presentation, and 10 women in Mingo County got cameras. There was a group in Lincoln and Kanawha counties and two groups in Boone County.”

This week, the Mingo County group, all of whom live in and around the Lenore area, showed their work at the Lenore Grade School.

“I have had a lot of fun,” participant Anna Hartley said. Hartley is a special education teacher, and said she enjoyed taking pictures of nature.

“I like taking pictures, and I tried to show the natural beauty of the community,” Hartley said, explaining her photos. “I just went up and down the road, snapping things that interest me and things that could better the community.”

In addition to tell their stories, the project is also intended to help the participants bring attention to problems, and hopefully by shedding light on issues important to them, begin to make improvements.

“When the groups meet with each other, we try to develop project ideas to address problems they have identified,” Bell explained. “One of the purposes of the project is to increase civic engagement in rural coalfield communities and give voice to residents’ concerns and ideas for change.”

Donna Branham is a community activist who hopes her photostory will bring people together.

“I am glad the community did this,” she said. “I think this collection is magnificent. Maybe other people will get involved when they see these pictures.”

Some of the themes the women presented in their collections were positive aspects of Appalachian culture, the close knit families and communities and the unique and beautiful landscape as well as issues they would like to improve, such as pollution and litter, road conditions and unused and neglected public facilities. Bell said the group from Boone County has already made an impact with policy makers in Charleston, where their creativity and tenacity got results.

“The Boone group took some pictures, and the stories that go with them, of the roads there, to their legislators,” she said. “One of the women, a nurse, said that the roads were so rough she couldn’t properly care for patients while they were being transported by ambulance. The legislators got their roads patched, but the group wasn’t satisfied with a temporary solution. The women called several times a week until their roads moved to the top of the priority list.”

Several ideas for community project resulted from Photovoice. Some of those projects

include a walking track on a vacant lot, a community yard sale, working to improve the Laurel Lake Campground and helping preserve the history of the area. Plans for the projects were specified at the Lenore Grade School showing, with opportunities for people to get involved.

The project was funded by Cabin Creek Health Systems, several public entities and foundations, and the Clay Center for the Arts and Sciences. Selected photostories from each of the 40 participants will be exhibited in the Juliet Museum of Art at the Clay Center in Charleston April 15 through 19. A public reception for the Photovoice women and their exhibit will be held Friday, April 17 from 5 p.m. To 9 p.m.

For more information about Photovoice, visit [www.wvphotovoice.org](http://www.wvphotovoice.org). To contact Shannon Bell, email her at [WVPhotovoice@gmail.com](mailto:WVPhotovoice@gmail.com).

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