

WINTER 2012
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ARKANSAS RURAL COMMUNITY LEADERS PUSH FORWARD

“There’s a need for political awareness within our communities, especially in the South. We’ve been left out for so long, and it’s partially our fault, but we’ve got to move forward.” With this, Troy Dawkins of Strong captures the essence of what’s happening in communities all over South Arkansas. People who are tired of waiting for change to come to them are leading their communities to push for change themselves.



Gloria Majors of Prescott told a holiday gathering of residents and officials that the Prescott Concerned Citizens are working with elected officials and holding them accountable for improvements to their community and schools.

With a school board election coming up, parents in Strong who had concerns about their school decided to take action. Working with Panel organizers, they laid out a platform describing the education opportunities they wanted for their children. They began interviewing the candidates for the school board and they held a public forum. Voters turned out, and they elected the candidates who were most responsive to the parents’ concerns. The parents could have stopped then, but instead they began going to school board meetings and they kept going consistently, sometimes just listening, sometimes speaking up on issues. “The new school board and new superintendent are becoming more responsive to our input and concerns. It’s encouraging other community members to step up and join us,” said Dawkins.

In Gould, Curtis Mangrum and other residents began working for change seven years ago. The city has acquired a com-

NEW COALITION OF LANDOWNERS, ACTIVISTS PUSH FOR BETTER REGULATIONS ON NATURAL GAS DRILLING



There was a full house at the Legislature's interim hearing on natural gas drilling.

Many Arkansans living in the Fayetteville Shale area are discouraged by the recent boom of natural gas drilling activity there. Landowners have had their properties damaged by drilling wells, their roads continually in disrepair from industry traffic, and seen their livelihoods put at risk of contaminants creeping into their creeks, streams, and groundwater. Yet Jeff Pistole, chair of the newly formed United for Responsible Gas Exploration (URGE) coalition, is feeling optimistic. "The opportunity is there right now. There is a group of people who are on fire for this issue, meeting with industry and agency officials, and

getting things done."

Leaders within URGE are in discussions with natural gas industry and state agency officials and are starting to see progress. The Arkansas Oil and Gas Commission has improved well-casing standards and now requires the industry to be more transparent about their disclosure of chemicals used in fracking operations. The Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality has implemented more air and water quality testing, hired more inspectors, begun revamping its records, and conducting a stronger review of the way they regulate the industry.

URGE arose out of an informal alliance between landowners who were tired of dealing with the banged-up roads, the noise, the dust in the air, and the increased sedimentation in their water and environmental activists who have been working on this issue since the industry started fracking in the mid 2000's. They worked together to propose solutions later drafted into legislation introduced in the 2011 legislative session. The bills failed to pass after strong industry opposition and were sent to interim study. In the wake of the interim study hearings in September, the informal group of landowners and activists joined with others such as Trout Unlimited, area resort owners and other business leaders and started taking steps towards building a formal coalition.

With organizing support from the Panel, URGE now has a governance structure in place with Pistole serving as chair and 2 working committees. The policy committee is focused on working with state agencies and industry representatives to get better regulations for drilling in the state. The Outreach Committee is working to create a sustainable organization for the coalition and promote awareness among landowners about the issue.

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"WE WANT REGULATIONS THAT KEEP OUR WATER CLEAN, KEEP OUR AIR CLEAN, AND KEEP SOME OF THE BAD ACTORS OUT OF THE STATE."

— Jeff Pistole, United for Responsible Gas Exploration

Beverly Langford, a landowner in the area said she's upset about how the industry has affected her property and the surrounding area. "When we moved here, it was beautiful, every turn was like a postcard picture. For 14 years, everyone complimented us on how great the water from our well tasted. Now, every turn, there's a gas truck or an injection well. The roads are torn up, and we have to buy a truckload of bottled water every week. I'm worrying about whether my grandkids can play in my yard."

The URGE coalition is currently focused on getting stronger regulations enacted through the two main state agencies who oversee natural gas drilling: The Arkansas Oil and Gas Commission (AOGC) and the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ).

Langford said she was encouraged by some of the improved practices.

"One of the problems we had was the silica dust from the drilling wells. They had fans that were just blowing it off, and it was everywhere, it looked terrible and made it hard to breathe. Now they have a vacuum that captures the dust, and they put it in a landfill. It's good to see progress like this."

URGE also wants state agencies to require companies to follow Best Management Practices (BMPs), which promote safer drilling. Pistole says that while the larger companies like Southwest Energy have the resources to follow BMPs, there are smaller companies who do not, who are more likely to cut corners.

"If there's not a law for them to follow, they can just do whatever. We had a small company with an open containment pond for over 2 years. When it began to rain heavily, the pond started to leak and make its way into the headwaters of one of

the creeks. Turned out, that company was in bankruptcy, just went up, drilled, and left it. That's the kind of thing we want to avoid," Pistole said.

Landowners and other citizens who want to get involved with URGE should contact Panel organizer Peyton Rose at peyton@arpanel.org or 501-499-5778.

"The best thing a citizen can do is to watch," Pistole says. "Keep an eye on what's going on around your property; look for any suspicious activity, like trucks going up and down the roads in the middle of the night who might be dumping. Report anything to AOGC and ADEQ, because if the complaints keep coming in, the industry will know that people are watching, and they'll be more conscientious about what they're doing."



Mikel Lolley, Dina Nash and Jeff Pistole joined 30 others to plan the campaigns for responsible natural gas drilling, clean water and a statewide energy plan at the Citizens First Congress' Environmental Caucus meeting in January.

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Troy Dawkins and others came from Strong to support the Gould Citizens Advisory Council while they work to move their community forward.

munity center, a Neighborhood Watch program, a polling place and made many other gains from their efforts. “The main thing I see,” said Mangrum, “is a difference in attitudes towards political action. People weren’t really aware, they were just going along with whatever happened. But once you learn how it works, it’s like a chain reaction, more people want to learn more, do more, get more involved.”

For a while, the organized residents in Gould worked closely with city council members. But some members didn’t like their new relationship with the community group. Last year, these members threw the city into an uproar by pushing through an ordinance to stop all civic groups from meeting in the city. The

council eventually rescinded its ordinance, but not before harsh words turned to violence and the media painted the city as dysfunctional. Looking back, Mangrum is disappointed about what happened, but optimistic about the future of Gould: “Political leaders weren’t being held accountable, and now that they are, there has been some push-

back. But in the long run, it’s much better for our community if our leaders realize that they have to be accountable for representing the residents in Gould.”

In South Arkansas, residents are organizing in communities like Strong, Gould, Monticello, Marvell, Prescott, and Camden. But in other communities, residents are reluctant to become involved. Some are fearful of the consequences of challenging the status quo, and many simply think there is nothing that could be done about failing economies, poor schools and unsafe neighborhoods.

“Change is slow,” says Rev. Mary Purifoy of Chidester, outside of Camden. “There is still some of the ‘that’ll do’ mindset where people think things aren’t too bad so they shouldn’t rock the boat. But, when we start to highlight problems, people decide to get involved and take action.” Rev. Purifoy chairs the Southwest Arkansas Good Government Commission, a regional coalition that includes leaders from several communities in the area.

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“SINCE I’VE BECOME INVOLVED I REALIZE THAT NONE OF US HAVE THE LUXURY TO STAND ON THE SIDELINE. WE HAVE TO STAND UP AND TAKE ACTION OURSELVES.”

— Troy Dawkins, Strong Community Leadership Alliance

BUT ONCE YOU LEARN HOW IT WORKS, IT'S LIKE A CHAIN REACTION, MORE PEOPLE WANT TO LEARN MORE, DO MORE, GET MORE INVOLVED."

— Curtis Mangrum, Gould Citizens Advisory Council

In Prescott, parents were frustrated that their school board members were passing every motion unanimously with little discussion of critical issues. After training with Panel organizers, parents started coming to meetings informed and ready to engage the board. They convinced the board to reject a proposal to spend Title 1 funds on a new phone system by informing them that the funds were required by law to be spent on improving student achievement. Just recently, they influenced the board to reject hiring a candidate to teach special education who did not have the proper credentials.

As these communities take action, new groups continue to form, like the Concerned Citizens of Monticello. Joe Britton, the group's leader, says their motto is 'educate, educate, educate.' "Right now we're trying to make people more aware about what's going on with our city council, school board, county government, so that more people will get involved. We would love to eventually have someone in our group run for office here," he said.

While Britton is already looking ahead to electing grassroots leaders to local office, one of the younger members of the group is thinking even bigger. High School Junior Keturah Rucker said, "I'm excited to learn more about politics and government. I might even want to run for president someday."

As Monticello takes its first steps, as Prescott, Strong and Camden begin to up their game, and as Gould struggles with the push-back of the status quo to the changes they're bringing about, Mr. Dawkins says what people in all of these community groups are feeling:

"Since I've become involved I realize that none of us has the luxury to stand on the sidelines. We have to stand up and take action ourselves."

Welcome!

To new Panel staff:

Pamela Dawkins,
Peyton Rose, and
Shelby Howlett, intern.

THE PANEL STAFF

Bill Kopsky, Little Rock
Celestine Wesley, Little Rock
James Szenher, Little Rock
Peyton Rose, Damascus
Ana Phakhin, Little Rock
Brett Miracle Huie, Little Rock
Fay Knox, Deer
Janice El-Amin, Gould
Bernadette Devone, Pine Bluff
Rosemary Brown, Monticello
Patty Barker, Little Rock
Beth Ardapple, Bass

VISTA Volunteers:

Shirley Renix, Camden
Pamela Dawkins, Strong

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DONOR PROFILE: FANNIE FIELDS

Come to just about any major Panel or Citizens First Congress event and you can easily spot Fannie Fields. She stands out with her signature hats and big smile. Her decades of experience as an activist strengthen the work of both organizations.

"Ms. Fields brings a level-headed approach to our work, no matter how hard the fight for change" said Kate Althoff, current co-chair of the Citizens First Congress.

As chair of the Citizens First Congress in 2005 and 2007, Ms. Fields said her main goal was closing the education gap. "A few years ago, no one wanted to talk about it. But, by getting us mobilized and going to the capitol, the legislators realized that they had to start dealing with the issue, because it wasn't just going to go away, and we weren't just going to go away either," she said. Her commitment to the CFC paid off; under her leadership, they helped expand funding for Pre-K and convinced legislators to hold the first-ever hearing addressing the academic achievement gap.

At home in Holly Grove near Marvell, Ms. Fields chairs the Marvell Concerned Citizens, which she helped organize.

Her community work began when she was living and working in Detroit. "I was always involved with what was going on, and I was going to the Capitol in Lansing where lawmakers were working. I got a chance to meet Bishop Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and his father."

When she retired and moved back to her birthplace in Arkansas, Ms. Fields was dismayed at what she found. "There were people in power

who were helping to keep the door closed for some of our children. The books in our schools were out of date and in terrible shape. Even the pools were still segregated and didn't allow any black children in to swim."

Under Ms. Fields' leadership, the Marvell Concerned Citizens are convening 20-30 people each month, with Panel organizers providing information and training so they can tackle problems with their local schools. "There had been a shortage of information available for grassroots people in Marvell. I think people are more motivated to act if they know how things work."

In addition to all the work she has done as a leader, Ms. Fields has been a donor to the Panel and Citizens First Congress for 7 years. She knows that all the time and money she has invested will result in more people being informed, organized, and empowered to fight for better schools, hold elected leaders accountable, and improve communities across the state.

"The Panel and CFC need more people to support the work that



they're doing. When they hold political trainings and help bring people to the Capitol, it makes a huge impact. A lot of people don't even know the function of their representatives, but when they learn more about the political process, they want to be a part of it so they can work to make things better in their communities."

**TO JOIN MS. FIELDS IN SUPPORTING
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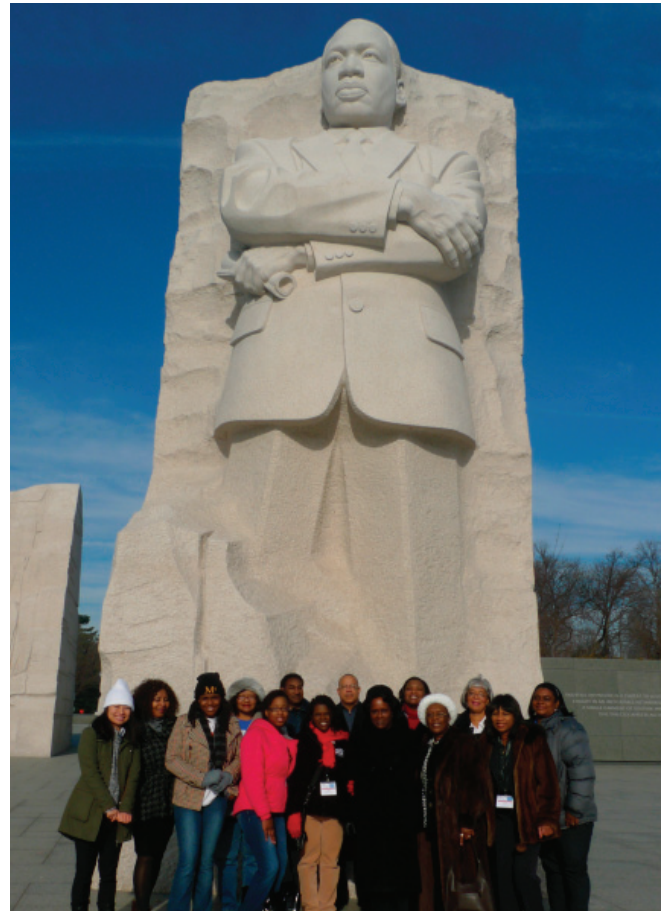
OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN CAMPAIGN ON THE MOVE IN ARKANSAS AND WASHINGTON DC

Leaders in the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign were brimming with energy as they returned from the National OTL Conference in Washington DC. Over 25 adults and youth from across the state attended the conference. "It was inspiring to me to get to see that we are not alone, and that there were so many other groups at work on this issue. Now we can take back what we learned and make things better in our community," said Brittny Banks, a young leader from the Concerned Citizens of Monticello.

Arkansas OTL leaders are paving the way for more children to have access to quality education. They're working to get more parents, students, and community leaders involved and make sure teachers are more prepared to meet students' educational needs.

"Arkansas stood out at the conference," said Sherece West of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. "We had people from all over our state who are doing outstanding work to promote pre-Kindergarten and after-school programs, boost learning opportunities for low-income and minority students, help immigrant high school graduates gain access to college and meet the special needs of rural schools," she said. West presented at the conference along with Bernadette Devone and Bill Kopsky from the Panel, and Lavina Grandon from the Rural Community Alliance.

Arkansas activists like Gloria Majors of the Prescott Concerned Citizens met organizers and advocates from around the country, taking in new ideas and proudly representing a state that is in the forefront of education reform. "I was excited to see people from Arkansas on the panels," Majors said. "People are paying attention to what we're doing here, and that was great for us to see."



Arkansas Education leaders visited the new memorial for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr while they were in Washington D.C. "Getting to see Dr. King like that, you can't help but think of his speech, when he talks about black and white children sitting together, as brothers and sisters. We've come a long way, but we still don't have equality in education. We hope to honor his legacy by continuing that fight, making sure everyone has an equal opportunity to learn," said Regina Von Tungeln, OTL co-chair.



Dr. Sherece West of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation spoke to education advocates from around the country about the outstanding work Arkansas leaders are doing to increase education opportunities for all children.



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