The Catholic Worker in Spencer, WV strives to provide a spiritual center of hope in Appalachia by addressing issues of poverty through education, contemplation & outreach.

The St. Isaac of Nineveh—Gift of Tears Catholic Worker
885 Orchard Run Rd.
Spencer, WV 25276

You
Your house
Your City, Your State
Your Zip

ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

Introducing...

Otto
I love everybody... except coyotes!

the Great Pyrenees chicken protector

(6 months)

7 weeks
First day on the job
2 months
3 months
4 months—growing up together
5 months
SUMMER 2000— I left Seattle with a Pastoral Studies degree in my back pocket and what worldly possessions I could fit in the back of my pick-up truck. My destination was West Virginia; my mission was to run a Catholic Worker Farm. Well, we all know what God does when we tell of our plans, right?

My first Catholic Worker Farm, in Pence Springs, was established in 1981 by my mentor, Mike Kirwan. There, I lived and worked with homeless men from Washington D.C., hosted incoming service groups, and ran Camp Namaste, a summer camp for underprivileged children. A year later, Eric Smith joined us.

SPRING, 2002— As our time there came to an end, we decided to serve local needs rather than bring more poor folks into the state. In temporary housing at St. Mary’s of the Greenbrier, a small mission church in Alderson, we started a new Catholic Worker. By SUMMER, we had found another farm, on Colt Run here in Spencer, we could use in exchange for caretaking.

SPRING 2003 - Soon after Eric and I parted ways, the tin shack at 213 Orchard Run became available. How could I pass up 189 acre farm for $150 a month...complete with an outhouse?!? My ECO ministries (Education, Contemplation & Outreach) took shape at the old two-one-three. I hosted service groups, worked with inmates, led retreats, went on speaking engagements and learned the finer points of homesteading by my neighbors who, only sometimes, snickered at my attempts. I raised gardens, chickens, sheep and rabbits, buried one dog and took on two more, much to the chagrin of my one-eyed cat. I jumped on three Boards of Directors, taught at my church and held down 2 jobs. In WINTER 2004, the ministry went “global” when I joined Chuck Conner on a service trip to Nepal and Tibet. Farm #3 was a dream come true, until it went up for sale at a price way beyond my means.

SUMMER 2006 - Thankfully, Jean Melarvie and the Board of Sunny Bank Farm Land Trust gave me permission to move across town to my fourth Farm for as long as I needed or wanted access to it. With plenty of space to myself, I was able to add “hospitality” to my list and took in a woman in need. That year, I was offered the position of Administrative Director for the Catholic Committee of Appalachia (CCA), and began working on social and environmental justice issues at the regional level, particularly the coal extraction process of mountaintop removal and its devastating effects on the land and surrounding communities.

SPRING 2007 - But, I was way overdue for a place I could call my own. Had it not been for my neighbor, Bill Reichenbach, back on Orchard Run, I’d probably still be an itinerant farmer. Bill sold me 13 acres of his farm at a price I could afford and I couldn’t be happier back in my old holler. With the help of no-interest loans from Mom & Dad and Christine Haskins, I got my own little cabin, The Comfort Zone. Since then, I’ve been working from home on a beautiful wooded hillside I call Turtle Hill, as they were the first ones to greet me. I continued to host service groups at Sunny Bank, and fundraised and saved to build a facility for groups here until....

SUMMER 2010 - After 10 years, I am finally catching on to the lesson of living in the present moment, as plans have changed once again. This summer, a wonderful family came along with a ministry that fits perfectly with the purpose of the Land Trust. The Simms moved into the Sunny Bank Farm house to foster children with disabilities. Yet, without enough time or money to finish a retreat house before my Fall groups arrived, we placed a pre-fab building made of insulated recycled steel panels at the edge of Bill’s property that accommodates up to 12 comfortably. So, for now, we’re hosting groups in the Tool Box (bunk house) and we eat and meet at Bill’s “shack” a short distance away. If the “now” changes, we’ll be someplace else!
I. Education:

A. Speaking Engagements— topics include but are not limited to:

- Catholic Worker Movement
- Catholic Social Teachings
- Simple Living
- Causes & Cures of Poverty
- Care of God’s Creation vs. Mountaintop Removal
- Orientation on Service in Appalachia
- Appalachian Culture from an Outsider’s Perspective
- Contemplative Prayer
- Prayer Forms from Around the World

B. Experiential Learning—

- Living Simply
- Group Building
- Leadership Training
- Hunger Banquet
- Service Learning
- Tours in conjunction with Flatridge Farm:
  - Mountaintop Removal
  - History of the Coal Wars in West Virginia
  - Cultural Museum in Charleston
  - The Whipple (coal company) Store

II. Contemplation

A. Individual and Group Retreats — Offering space for those looking to sink into the solitude of nature and the simplicity of the present moment. A chance to rest, refocus, rejuvenate, and reconnect away from the fast pace of life. Hold your own retreat or invite me to lead a tailor-made retreat that will fit your specific needs or those of your group. Educational and Eco-Retreats also available.

B. Spiritual Companionship — When you need a sounding board, or someone to just “be” with you, as you sift through, face, or celebrate life’s twists and turns. Available by phone, email and snail mail. Or just come for a visit. The front porch seems to work wonders for people’s lives.

III. Outreach

Random Acts of Kindness
Filling in the gaps when other people, organizations and agencies are not able or willing to do so.

Collaborating on Community Projects
Sunny Bank Farm Land Trust, West Virginia Regional Land Trust, CROP Walk, Roane Rural Housing

Hosting Service Groups
Visiting volunteer groups come to serve those in need, learn about the region and be immersed in the culture.

Offering Opportunities to Give
Informing readers of situations where their contributions will go directly to the source and make a personal difference in people’s lives.
I met Mike in 1991, on a Spring Break service trip my junior year in college. He was a Catholic Worker running a soup kitchen in Washington, D.C. and offering hospitality to men and women from the streets on his farm in West Virginia. If he hadn’t mentioned wanting to start a summer camp for underprivileged kids, I probably would have chalked it all up as a great experience and moved on. But our shared vision kept us in touch for 9 years until we made Camp Namaste a reality. A year later, Michael died of cancer, and I committed myself to following his footsteps in service to the poor.

Wess Harris  
If you’re familiar with the history of the Catholic Worker Movement, you know when Dorothy Day met Peter Maurin, he talked a mile a minute about his ideas for creating a new society in the shell of the old, and the only thing Dorothy caught was something about publishing a newspaper. That’s what hooked her. My first conversation with Wess Harris was very similar. When Wess went on and on about “raising hell,” all I could really gather was that he wanted to help me with the college groups, and I was in.

What I didn’t realize then was the impact he would have on the educational portion of my ministry. Wess is a local cattle farmer, former coal miner, sociologist, book publisher, social activist, professor of Labor History, and used to run a group home on a farm for those with disabilities. He gives tours of Mountaintop Removal for my students, introduces them to the current issues in our State, and “raises hell” by constantly motivating us all to examine, challenge and work to change the status quo of systems that cause injustice.

Vivian Stockman  
Vivian is the Communications Director for the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition (OVEC) leading the charge to put an end to Mountaintop Removal. She also happens to be my neighbor, close friend and role model. Her passion and tireless struggle to save our mountains, combined with her sense of humor and love of fun, encourage and rejuvenate me in my own work. With the majority of my morale support coming from long distances, I’m thankful to have her so close to home.

Appalachian Bishops Pastoral Letters  
These poetic letters, way ahead of their time, were the inspiration behind the Gift of Tears Catholic Worker. Our mission from the start was to meet the challenges set forth in these documents. They address the dehumanizing circumstances of Appalachia and call for more sustainable efforts in economics, the environment and communities.

Catholic Committee of Appalachia  
The letters themselves are moving, but those who wrote them inspire me even more. Men and women, religious and lay, who still work in the hills and hollers, listened to the poor they served and took their plight to the Bishops. The members of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia continue to be a prophetic voice for the voiceless...the poor & Earth.
Silent Partners

Christine Haskins and Bill Reichenbach make it their business to keep me in business. Without these two behind the scenes, I could not keep this operation afloat logistically, fiscally, or emotionally. It is no small gift that they believe in me and in what I do. I am indebted to them for their counsel, survive with their support, thrive with their encouragement, and cherish their friendship.

Someone recently asked me, “Who do you go to when you need help?” Sr. Barbara Lucas keeps me spiritually grounded. Her guidance has been invaluable during the ups and downs of my life and work. Through her consistent reminders and example, I am brought back to the core of who I am.

Lewis Family Update

When Cecil stopped by the other day to invite me to a house party I said, “Cecil, you don’t have a house, remember?” But, he informed me they soon will! After the devastating fire that burned their home to the ground and kept it smoldering for over a week, several of you sent donations to help the Lewis family get back on their feet. I’m happy to report that, along with help from the Red Cross and the beginning of payments from the Insurance Company, your generosity has allowed the Lewises to put a down-payment on a mobile home that will be placed near the original house site, hopefully, by the end of the month. Thank you for opening your hearts and giving what you were able to help this family have a new beginning.

Jeffrey Brown Update

Ten years after his death, my former student, Jeffery Brown, finally has a marker for his grave, thanks to so many of you who pitched in for the cause. His best friend, Ronnie Dowdy, recently contacted me to say he has collected enough for the headstone, engraving and installation, and it will be placed on the gravesite before the snow falls. Without knowing either of these guys personally, you gave tribute to a childhood friendship and honored a young man who can now rest in peace with dignity. Your compassion and contributions have deeply touched this old teacher...

Fall Speaking Engagements

November 29th—Oak Farm Montessori School in Avilla, Indiana. My old summer camp friend, Joe Pounds, invited me to come talk to his 7th and 8th grade students. I’ll be answering 3 questions: 1) What did I want to do with my life when I was 13 years old? 2) What am I doing now and why am I doing it? 3) Where do I think I’ll be in 10 years?

November 30th—St. Joseph Catholic Church in Marblehead, Ohio. Family friends, Halle and Frank Bruening asked me to introduce my ministry to their local parish with the hopes of getting them involved in service trips & financial support.

...Thanks for Giving
Summer & Fall Reunions were a huge success! Come back on your own just to play and visit the people you served. Next one: December 31st - January 2nd.

Notre Dame College, Cleveland, OH—October 6-10
NDC was my first Fall Break Group in 2006 and they have faithfully returned each year with new and veteran students (and graduates!).

We enjoyed the autumn colors...
...cleared a bank of brush, weeds & stumps...
...moved metal pipes...BIG metal pipes...
...hauler stuff out of Sunny Bank Retreat House...
...hiked the hills...
...raised the frame for Clerc’s High Tunnel Greenhouse...
...and, met new friends and neighbors.

ON THE SCHEDULE:
Kent State University, Kent, OH
November 11-14
FIRST WINTER GROUP
Denison University, Granville, OH
January 8-13
WHY WOULD ANYONE WANT TO LIVE IN WEST VIRGINIA!?! THERE'S NOTHING THERE!!!