Nobody takes clean water for granted in Dickenson County. In southwest Virginia, abandoned coal mines, sewage, illegal dumps, soil erosion caused by logging, and carelessly sprayed pesticides have severely polluted the Flannagan Reservoir – the main source for drinking water for 50,000 people. The Committee for Improvement of Dickenson County, an Appalachian Community Fund grantee, is training citizens to test the water at the Reservoir and is reporting findings to the Army Corps of Engineers to hasten clean-up of the water.

"Most residents are happy that somebody outside a government agency is watching. People find we’re more truthful," Rose notes. "If citizens don’t protect their air and water, who will?"

Neither the industries that have exploited the region nor the governments that should regulate them have seriously addressed this issue.

As resident Denis Rose notes, "For probably 70 years, the primary source of income was coal mining. Once they took the coal, gas companies came in. Now lumber companies are coming in to take what’s left. Nothing is being put back in and Dickenson County is poor."

Years of mining and logging operations have severely damaged the region’s water supply. About 50,000 people in Dickenson County and surrounding areas get drinking water from the John W. Flannagan Reservoir whose water is severely polluted by abandoned coal mines, sewage, illegal dumps, soil erosion caused by logging, carelessly sprayed pesticides and other sources. Old coal mines could poison the water completely should the PCBs, toxic chemicals, and heavy metals trapped inside leach into the reservoir. "It appears like those chemicals are slowly getting into the water supply," Rose warns.

The Committee received its first grant from the Appalachian Community Fund in 2000. In 2005, as citizens monitor water quality, the Committee will teach residents how to report findings to government agencies.

One day, the Committee hopes, people in Dickenson County will be able to give their children clean drinking water from their home faucets. This is social change.
In the past three months ACF board members have exhaustively reviewed more than 60 proposals received in the annual general program cycle. But the process isn’t exhaust- ing — it’s inspiring, exciting, sustaining, because grant pro- posals aren’t just paper application forms at ACF. They edu- cate us on emerging issues, methods, constituencies, strate- gies, policy and analysis. They expand our perspective, giv- ing us a vivid montage of the leaders and groups who are changing Central Appalachia. In answers to our questions, we see energy, vitality, vision and passion for social justice. We see how groups address local and regional issues and how problems and solutions evolve over time.

The granting process is impressive, revealing both the work our groups are doing and the unique process that guides ACF decision and grantmaking. ACF grantmaking differs from traditional foundation grantmaking in the who and the how. The who are not outsiders, but 12-16 people from traditional foundation grantmaking in the who and the how. The how problems and solutions evolve over time.

Each year, proposals show us new strategies for making change. We’re inspired by the struggles and courage of people overcoming oppression in their communities. We know it’s long-term work; we know these are vulnerable times for organizing. Yet we also know that given resources and support, communities can build networks, coalitions and strategies for change. This is what grassroots is: growing and spreading the movement from the ground up and out.

In grant applications, we see groups dealing with the most significant issues of our time, creating new ways to organize, to make decisions and create change. We discover people determining for themselves what directions and solutions they’ll seek and how they’ll build consensus and common ground despite class, race, or gender differences, ensuring that there is a place for voices previously unheard and unvalued.

As we envision our future, we note with deep sadness the passing of three inspiring leaders: Kenneth Jones of North Carolina, a brilliant anti-racism trainer and organizational development consultant, died unexpectedly in December. Ernest Leonard, dedicated executive director of the Cooperative Action Project of Southern McDowell County (CAPS) also died in December. In late January, we were stunned by the sudden death of Peter Reilly of Berea, Kentucky, one of ACF’s founders, long time board member and supporter whose vision and generosity helped shape ACF and its work. Their passing affirms for us the impor- tance of each person’s place in the struggle.

The 2005 Grantees will be announced this spring. Keep an eye on the web-site at www.appalachiancommunityfund.org. for the most up-to-date information.

Peter Reilly, one of ACF’s founding donors and board members, died this January. Peter’s philan- thropy was vibrant and energizing, steadily commit- ting his time, energy, wisdom, resources and experi- ence in organizations and causes he cared about. Peter had a strong commitment to transforming the way philanthropy was done. He believed in sharing power, and he worked hard to get “the philanthropy right.” In a recent reflection about philan- thropy in Appalachia and the country Peter said, “In today’s grantmaking world… people with money slap their name on a foundation, take control of the process and tell others how to do things. The Appalachian Community Fund model is quite differ- ent; it’s about the redistribution of wealth and income — moving it from the people who have it to community members, so that they can determine what people need and how to get it.”

We’d like to share with you one of the many trib- utes to Peter from his memorial service. Ron Hanft, staff member of the Funding Exchange in New York, says this about Peter: “It’s difficult to estimate how many lives around the world have been touched and improved by the life and work of Peter Reilly. He founded the Appalachian Community Fund and was the first to open a donor-advised fund at the Funding Exchange. Peter’s philanthropy took chances, reaching out to work with folks who were also taking risks to reach and nurture grassroots social jus- tice organizations near home in Appalachia as well as around the US and in other countries...

The [Appalachian Community Fund] model is quite different; it’s about the redistribution of wealth and income — moving it from the people who have it to community members, so that they can determine what people need and how to get it.”

Over the years, Peter helped these programs grow and flourish, constantly finding new, sometimes outrageous ways to do this, like a few years ago, when he bicycled 3,000 miles from San Francisco to Portsmouth, Maine to raise money for the Appalachian Community Fund and the Funding Exchange.

Beyond his philanthropy and his energy, which were both significant, Peter gave an unceasing generosity of Spirit to the organizations and issues he believed in. Steadily, joyfully, Peter Reilly invested his time, his intelligence, his scrutiny, his sense of humor, and his clear-headed, enduring commitment to a better life for those who struggle against pover- ty, abuse or injustice.”

Thanks to donors like you, the Appalachian Community Fund is able to provide resources to grassroots groups that are mak- ing real, lasting change in Appalachia. If you haven’t made your gift this year, please send a gift today in the enclosed envelope or give online at www.appalachiancommunityfund.org. Together we are changing the face of Appalachia.