From Mountaintop Removal to Divestment

The Story of Swarthmore Students' Fight Against Fossil Fuels

By Hannah Jones

"If you go home and don't do anything, then I've wasted my time," we heard amidst the distant hum of heavy machinery.

I heard this from anti-mountaintop removal activist Adam Hall, echoed from the late Larry Gibson as we stood on his family's land on Kayford Mountain. We were standing in an island of trees and homes surrounded by a moonscape of leveled rubble. When I visited, I could see bulldozers in the distance, digging, shoveling, scraping away at the earth.

This is called mountaintop removal coal mining, a type of surface coal mining in which the top of a mountain is blasted off to expose the coal seam underneath. The rubble is then pushed into a nearby valley, covering streams and poisoning watersheds. Hundreds of thousands of acres of mountains and valleys in Central

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Aerial photograph documenting mountain top removal mining atop Kayford Mountain.

www.mountainkeeper.org

Larry Gibson was a renowned anti-mining environmentalist from West Virginia, who spent the majority of his adult life opposing mountaintop coal mining in the area, specifically at Kayford Mountain.

Appalachia have been destroyed by mountaintop removal, along with communities and lives.

Larry was a longtime activist against mountaintop removal coal mining. He had been living on Kayford Mountain his whole life, as did his father and grandfather and great-grandfather before him. When the coal company came a-knocking, Larry stood his ground, refusing to allow his home to be obliterated. His property still stands, through bullying, death threats, the murder of his dog, and more. His piece of land still stands, surrounded my strip mining.

Through his organization the Keepers of the Mountains Foundation, he would host student groups, church groups, and more to come see the devastation firsthand, and tell them his story. Visitors heard about poisoned water, coal company thugs shooting his dog and sending him death threats, centuries of political corruption, shirking of clean air and water standards, and more.

In 2010, when I was a student at Swarthmore College, a group of students visited Larry and heard his story. And as he said to most of his visitors, he told the group that his time was wasted if we didn't do anything. As a group of impressionable students, this was a powerful call to action. And while many of us were sympathetic to sustainability pushes on campus, visiting West Virginia made it clear that composting at Swarthmore College wasn't going to stop the coal industry. We needed to step up our game.

Many of us had worked with George Lakey, a longtime movement scholar and activist, on the Global Nonviolent Action Database, a collection of more than 700 case studies on nonviolent direct action campaigns. We researched nonviolent campaigns from all over the world and throughout history. In our research, we learned about the movement on U.S. college campuses to divest from apartheid in South Africa. The tactic proved effective at shifting the debate in the United States on the ethics of apartheid. It turned a previously gray area issue in the U.S. psyche into a clear violation of justice and human rights. This shift then opened up the space for larger political action, including sanctions.

We wanted to support the work of Larry and so many others fighting mountaintop removal in Central Appalachia, but were not from the region and could not leave school to go organize there, nor would it necessarily have been appropriate to do so. I had done some early actions with the Earth Quaker Action Team, which was pressuring PNC Bank to stop funding mountaintop removal coal mining, and had also answered calls from organizers in Appalachia to do actions at the Philadelphia Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) office. The Philadelphia and Atlanta EPA offices have the power to approve or deny strip-mining permits, so we in Philadelphia could play a role pressuring them to deny particular permits when the timing worked in tandem with organizing efforts in Central Appalachia.

Still, many of us in the early stages of Swarthmore Mountain Justice were interested in running a campaign in our community, on our campus, where we could build a degree of power.

Through our study of social movements and mentorship from organizers like George, we could glimpse the whole system of pillars that prop up the coal industry. The EPA is one of those pillars, banks are another, and universities also play their part in defending the status quo. We saw that our college was not only complicit

in the destruction of communities around the world, but was *profiting* off of that destruction. Swarthmore's endowment is $1.8 billion, and carries with it quite a bit of clout. If Swarthmore were to divest from fossil fuels, it would draw a clear line in the sand: It is wrong to profit off of the destruction of others' communities.

Meanwhile, several older students had recently returned from Denmark. They had been working on the lead-up to and follow-through from the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Conference. They, along with many others in the youth climate movement at the time, had been sorely disillusioned with the United Nations' (in) action on climate, and encouraged us to do something that took the fight straight to the fossil fuel industry. One of them told a small group of us that we should do divestment, but that it would be "25 years ahead of its time," and that we might not win, but could still build a movement from it.

In early 2011, we officially started a fossil fuel divestment campaign, calling on the school to divest from 16 fossil fuel companies. We used some of our knowledge of other nonviolent campaigns and mentorship from various organizers in the Philadelphia area to run our campaign, doing street theater, petitions, a speaker series, and more. Because our group had formed, in many ways, in response to what we saw as insufficient action from many environmental efforts on campus, we were all interested in pushing some boundaries. We decided explicitly to run a nonviolent direct action campaign.

One of our earliest actions took place on an unseasonably warm winter day (unsettlingly apropos). I was playing the Swarthmore Board of Managers (Scrooge) in a divestment version of *A Christmas Carol*. I had planned to wear a suit jacket, but was too warm and settled for a sweater vest. It was a Sunday morning so we weren't expecting a huge turnout. We gathered our props, all made out of cardboard, and headed to the main grassy area on campus for our performance. A small gathering of students, mostly our friends, showed up to support us.

In the play, Scrooge was first visited by the

ghost of divestment past, reminding him of Swarthmore's campaign to divest from South African apartheid. He is then visited by the Ghost of Divestment Present, and is shown the damage the fossil fuel industry causes in West Virginia. He also sees how those communities are fighting back. It was important to us to tell the story of community members in West Virginia having agency, rather than being helpless victims. Finally, predictably, the Ghost of Divestment Future shows Scrooge students successfully moving the board to divest from fossil fuels. As this happens, the fossil fuel industry (personified by my friend Alexa wielding a pitchfork and a bucket of oil), crumbling like the Wicked Witch of the West (yes, we did mix genres).

Though perhaps a bit didactic, we did this action to spark our own creativity and to tell our story in a way that would get people's attention on campus.

Still, when we posted the video on the campus digital newspaper, someone left a comment saying that the street theater made light of the havoc the coal industry wreaks on communities in Central Appalachia. This led to ongoing discussions in our group about what tone to strike and how to deal with critique. Many of us felt that the tone of the action made it more accessible to the campus community, while others felt anxious about betraying the magnitude of the issue we were addressing. Still others worried that bringing too much gloom and doom would be read by some students as preachy. Throughout the rest of our campaign, we attempted to strike a balance between a degree of whimsy, while also bringing the weight of the ecological crisis into relief on campus.

All the while, the story we told was about mountaintop removal coal mining. That issue had been our impetus for action, and we believed deeply in centering environmentalism on human impacts. We learned this from environmental justice organizers and authors that we encountered in our classes, at conferences, and through our organizing mentors. The fact of the matter is, mountaintop removal, as well as other forms of extreme energy extraction and climate impacts, are killing people right now, and have been for decades. Climate change is not a distant threat—there are communities around the world that have borne the brunt of this crisis for decades. At Swarthmore we were relatively insulated from these impacts, and wanted to learn from and act in solidarity with those who did not have our buffers of various privileges.

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In those earlier days, a number of other campuses picked up the divestment tactic to divest from coal, all of us supported by the Responsible Endowments Coalition, Sierra Student Coalition, and the Energy Action Coalition. They assisted us with technical knowledge about endowments, helped us with campaign planning, and elevated our story to help it gain media attention.

In the fall of 2012, largely due to 350.org's "Do the Math" tour, divestment took off, growing to more than 300 campaigns in a few short months. The tour told the story of the untenable "math" of the fossil fuel industry's plans. We have a limited "budget" of carbon that we can release into the atmosphere without pushing the Earth beyond a two-degree Celsius temperature rise (still, a dangerous number, but the target that even the world's wealthiest nations have agreed to.)

A strong part of the story was about young people standing up for their futures. The fact that the very institutions educating us for our futures are investing in the destruction of that future is a staggering irony. This is a powerful story, but we in Swarthmore Mountain Justice were also interested in maintaining the narrative around directly impacted communities. Once again, we were wary of continuing the story that climate change is predominantly about carbon in the atmosphere. This mattered to me because the stories we tell

influence what solutions we push for. This story can so easily allow us to believe, for instance, that carbon trading is a viable response to the climate crisis. When we look from a social justice perspective, however, we can see that carbon trading continues to put the burden of the climate crisis on marginalized people all over the world.

In that fall of 2012, many of us in Swarthmore Mountain Justice started talking about what our role could be in shaping a movement that was about to explode. We knew we wanted to cultivate a narrative around social justice within the movement, and we wanted to create structures for students to take leadership and shape strategy for the movement. So we decided to host a conference to take place at Swarthmore in February of 2013—the Fossil Fuel Divestment Convergence. We discussed how to bring in a "solidarity organizing" framework in a way that students would resonate with. We designed the arc of the weekend programming to make the connections between on-campus divestment work and grassroots environmental justice organizing self-evident.

We also had many discussions of who to bring to speak on campus. Most of our relationships were with white organizers in West Virginia, which had taught us a great deal. Still, beyond naming the connections for ourselves, we had not built racial justice into our organizing work, and were wanting to also learn from communities of color fighting on the frontlines. This very much informed our speaker and trainer lineup.

Close to 200 students attended and heard speakers from frontline (directly impacted) communities from around the country—Crystal Lameman of the Beaver Lake Cree Nation fighting the tar sands, Junior Walk from West Virginia fighting mountaintop removal coal mining, *Colorlines* editor Aura Bogado talking about climate debt, Yudith Nieto fighting oil refineries in Houston, and more. We wanted to bring together two contingents of people who have a large stake in seeing an end to the fossil fuel industry: people in communities that have been sacrificed time and again in the name of fossil fuel profits, and young people who will be bearing the consequences of the climate crisis far longer than the generations that came before them. This was about connecting it with racial justice and economic justice.

Students heard about the type of commitment that is required when fighting for one's life. They heard about connections between racial, economic, and ecological justice, and about who tends to be hit first and worst by crises of all kinds. Crystal talked about how the tar sands are just

Crystal Lameman, of the Beaver Lake Cree Nation, addressed students at Swarthmore.

the most recent manifestation of the centuries-long process of disenfranchisement First Nations people have faced in the Americas. Aura talked about how people of color, especially those in the Global South, have been least responsible for the climate crisis, yet bear the brunt of extraction, waste dumping, natural disasters. On top of that, when those people try to migrate because of what the Global North has caused, they are criminalized and deported. The connections between histories of colonialism and racism and the climate crisis were glaring.

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The convergence culminated in a march and rally in Swarthmore's main administrative building. Two hundred people crammed into the entrance hall as our art team raised a giant tree of fists from the ground up to the second floor. On the left side of the tree, fracking rigs, corporate suits with skeleton heads, and an oil spill rose up the stairs. On the other side, a giant earth puppet and a sea of fists stood. We knew which side we wanted to be on. The board and administration often made the argument that the endowment was not to be used for political purposes, but we knew that the endowment was already being used, explicitly or not, to keep those suits, oil spills, and fracking wells alive.

Since the convergence, I have seen a growing interest in connecting climate issues with racial justice and economic justice fights. The upswelling of action around the deaths of Eric Garner and Mike Brown have also made it unquestionably clear how alive racism is in this country. Many students see that we can no longer afford to overlook those connections.

One of the newer efforts in the fossil fuel divestment addresses just those connections, and creates a pathway for even more direct solidarity with communities fighting the fossil fuel industry in their own backyards. A new partnership is emerging between the fossil fuel divestment movement and the Climate Justice Alliance, a network of grassroots organizations around the United States fighting the fossil fuel industry, and building community-owned alternatives. They are, in other words, fighting for a "just transition" off of an extractive economy to an economy that values "land, labor, and life." And many of the tools for that transition exist within low-income communities and communities of color already. While the climate crisis is a crisis at a scale we have not seen, communities on the margins have faced ongoing crises since the beginning of colonialism, and hence have developed tools for resilience, or as Naomi Klein says, regeneration, through crisis.

Hannah Jones is training with the Center for Story-Based Strategy and recently moved back to her home state of Washington to work for a just transition in the Pacific Northwest. Author's note: This piece was written in 2014. Its lessons are still useful, though it is worth noting that, as one could expect, the fossil fuel divestment movement has morphed and changed, as has the larger political landscape. In particular, it's worth noting the leadership that the Movement for Black Lives has taken in not only pushing for divestment, but also fighting for reinvestment into communities that have been hit hardest by racism, climate change, economic injustice, and more.

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