

OUR ROOTS
RUN DEEP
AS IRONWEED

Appalachian Women
and the Fight for
Environmental Justice

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CHAPTER I

“HOW CAN THEY EXPECT ME
AS A MOTHER TO LOOK OVER THAT?”

Maria Gunnoe’s Fight
for Her Children’s Health and Safety



Maria Gunnoe in her beloved West Virginia mountains. Photo courtesy of Giles Ashford.

Maria Gunnoe is a lifelong resident of Bob White, West Virginia, and takes great pride in her Cherokee heritage. She is a community organizer with the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition and recipient of numerous awards, including the University of Michigan Wallenberg Medal (2012), the Goldman Environmental Prize (2009), the Rainforest Action Network's David vs. Goliath Award (2007), the Joe Calloway Award for Civic Courage (2006), and the West Virginia Environmental Council's Environmental Courage Award (2005).

I interviewed Maria at her home in July 2007. Maria's narrative reveals that her entry into the environmental justice movement was largely motivated by her role as a mother, and her anger at that role being compromised. Maria's home was severely flooded on her daughter's birthday in June 2003 because of a mountain-top removal coal mine behind her house. Five acres of her land washed away that night, and the raging water nearly took her house as well.

“It was a night I will never forget”:

The flood of 2003

June the fifteenth of 2003 was my daughter's birthday—I'll start there. We had a birthday party, she got a bicycle for her birthday, had a real good day. The evening of her birthday, it started raining—about 4:00 in the evening. And it was a really heavy rain. But honestly, though, we get heavy rains here in the spring—we always have. It started raining about 4:00, and by 7:00, the water was literally running from one hill to the other right here behind me. A stream that you could raise your foot and step over turned into a raging river in three hours' time. I've lived here my whole life, and I've never seen anything like that. And I hope and pray to God that I never see anything like that again. The stream come up, and when it come up, it just kept coming up, and up, and up. It washed away about five acres of our property. I lost two access bridges, and one of my dogs was killed right up there. He was tied outside the creek and it took him, just tumbled him down the middle of all that flood. My daughter was over here at a friend's house when the flooding first started. And within twenty minutes after it started raining, I left out of here. It was raining hard—I [had to] go get my baby, you know. I wasn't gone maybe fifteen, twenty minutes, and we couldn't get back in.

I threw a rain slicker over her head and threw her over my shoulder and waded the water across. The water came up to my hips across that crossing. Once we got in here, there was no way out. We was surrounded by water. In forty-five minutes' time, life went from being just completely heavenly to just sheer hell. All night long, you could hear our structures—pieces and bits of our structures that was on up the holler—you could just hear them twisting and maiming in the water. It was a night that I will never forget. If

I live to be a hundred years old, I'll never forget that—because I mean it was hell—it literally was. You can imagine the sound of five acres of land washing by you. *Nothin'* like that had ever taken place here. I've played in this yard in water that come up to my knees as a kid, and it didn't do that.

After I got my daughter back in here, the water was eating away at my sidewalk—the end of my sidewalk was standing out in mid-air. My family was in this house. And, I didn't know what else to do. I literally thought we were gonna die in this house. We started up the mountain, and the mountain was sliding. So you can't, you can't put your kids on a sliding mountain. You know, at least inside the house, you're thinking, at least they're dry inside the house. There was no safe place to go. [Emergency] 911 could not get to me, I couldn't get to them. All I had to do at that point was to hit my knees right there in that sidewalk and pray to God that that water stopped. [Voice breaking] and thank God it did. Because if it wouldn't have, it would have taken the earth that my house was setting on—and me and my family in the process.

The Scars and Maria's Call to Action

The experience of this flood left scars on the Gunnoe family, and the psychological trauma it caused her children served as Maria's call to action:

There is tremendous fear when it rains. When the flooding of 2003, when it got bad, my daughter went through a, hey, I feel safe in calling it a post-traumatic stress disorder. She would set up at night—if it was raining or thundering, or any weather alerts or anything like that going on on the news, my daughter would not sleep. And I, I didn't notice this to begin with. I was so overwhelmed with everything going on that I never even thought, “What's this putting my kids through?” Until one morning—I had noticed that she had been falling back in school, things wasn't going right in school. That was my first sign. And, one of her teachers said, “She sleeps in class.” She'd been a straight-A student ever since she started school, so that was never a problem. I found out one morning at 3:00 in the morning, it was thundering and lightning, and I go in, and I find her sitting on the edge of her bed with her shoes and her coat and her pants [on]. [Pauses, deep breath, voice cracks.] And I found out then . . . [pauses] . . . what it was putting my daughter through. [Crying.] And that is what *pissed me off*. How *dare* they steal that from my child! The security of being able to sleep in her own bed. The coal companies now own that. They now own my child's security in her own bed. [Pauses.] And how can they expect me as a mother to look over

that? How is it, what if I done this to their kids? What if I created *terror* in their children's lives? And that is what it has done to my children.

It has dramatically, and I mean *dramatically* changed our lives. At this point, we can't use the water that comes into our house—it's not safe. There's a very strange odor to the water that comes into my house. It killed my fish that I had in my fish tank for over five years. So, with that right there, that's all the scientific studies I need. Excuse me, but I can't afford the tests that need to be done to find out exactly what's in my water, but I know it's not what it used to be. So I won't, we don't consume it. We buy all of the water and pack it in, across where two access bridges used to be.

We as a family have literally been robbed of our opportunity to be a family. The things that we have sacrificed, no one should have to give up. No one should have to give up their water. There are so many tentacles of—so many aspects of our life—it, it hasn't changed it, it has taken it away. The biggest thing that I aspired to do—all I wanted to do was to be a mother. That's all I wanted to do growing up. And the first years of their life, I was a very dedicated mother. And after all this had taken place, in order for me to be a mother, and in order for me to keep my children safe, and ensure my children's future as free American citizens, I've had—it's not an option—I've had to stand up and fight for our rights.

The Loss of a Way of Life

My father and my grandfather, and even some of the women in my family, worked in the mines growing up. So mining was, it was always common. But what really started taking place in the '70s right here [strip mining] started happening. My grandfather explained to me what it was and that that was a different type of mining that they was doing. And he despised it, because of the destruction it done. Throughout my lifetime I literally watched the horizons around me disappear. Without realizing the widespread destruction that was taking place—sitting down here in the valleys and watching it take place on the mountains is one thing, but when you get up there and you see how huge it is, that's something else. I never realized it was so bad. My first fly-over was with SouthWings [nonprofit aviation organization], and that right there is really what fired me up. When I got off the plane that day, I cried all the way across the tarmac, all the way home, and when I pulled in my driveway, I sat there and just literally felt a sense of fear that I could not, I could not overcome this sense of fear. After seeing this and then driving back into it, thinking, "My God, I live in the middle of it," and not knowing it until I done that fly-over. I mean, you feel the blasting and you see all

the dust, all the trucks, but you don't really see the impact of it over time. I guess maybe the human mind doesn't have the capacity to accumulate all that without major research. It happens, and people don't even know that it's happening.

In 1996, my dad was offered a quarter of a million dollars for our place. Our place is not for sale—it's a homeplace, you can't buy and sell a homeplace, so of course my dad didn't sell. Last year, June of 2006, I had an assessor to come up here and reappraise this property. And it appraised for \$15,300. My house appraised for \$10,000. So the property is basically worthless. It's because of what they've done to it. I've got a neighbor behind me known as mountaintop removal coal mining. And it's, it's been hell. Since 2000, we've been flooded seven times. I've been flooded with no rain, which is something that people really do not believe. When they hear flood, no rain—"Oh, she's gotta be lyin'." No, it's the truth. The coal companies were working on the dam back here one day, and they were pumping water around the dam into the stream. The water came up about three feet—and there was no rain. I mean, it was blue skies. So we don't even need to have rain to be flooded; it's the manipulation of the headwaters of these streams is what's causing this. Each time that it's flooded I've looked at it—in 2001 I was flooded three times—each time, I look at it and I say, "Wow, I've never seen anything like that." And you know, each time it's got worse. And it's been, "Wow, I've never seen anything like that." When the 2003 flooding took place, it, it devastated me. I hope and pray to God I never see anything like that again.

There's days that I don't even want to get out of bed. Because I don't want to see that next layer of that mountain blasted off, you know, I just, I don't want to live it. There's days that I literally do not want to live it. I wouldn't trade my Sundays for nothing. Sundays are my quiet days. There's not drilling on the mountain behind me. There's no coal trains breezing by me. All the heavy equipment here on the highways, it's not present on Sundays. So Sunday, that's my day for gathering my thoughts.

I'm not real sure that moving away from it is gonna fix my problem. Moving away from it and into a community that has a coal-fired power plant or even two or three coal-fired power plants—how am I improving my life by leaving? I don't feel like I am, I'm just allowing them to run me out of my ancestral home. And with that, I'm allowing them to steal my children's culture and their heritage, and the upbringing that I had, which to me is a very unique upbringing.

Growing up, we always went into the mountains to gather. The men in my family and some of the women in my family were hunters, we gathered things:

mushrooms, berries. That's the reason our people settled this area initially, was because of the fact that the mountains were just full of foods that you can eat. My great grandmother was Cherokee, so she could definitely pick them out. To see that disappear, I mean, and in my lifetime, that's what's happened. Our ability as a people to take care of ourselves has disappeared along with the mountains. And quite honestly, there's people that I know personally that have grown old here taking care of themselves in these mountains. And now they're elder and they're no longer allowed into the mountain. So the herbs and the medicinal cures that they collected from these mountains that kept them healthy all these years, they're no longer allowed to go back into these mountains. That's like cutting off our life-source. How can they do that? It really angers you to know that they can blast thousands of acres of ginseng with no questions asked, and it'll never grow back. It'll never, never, ever, ever will it ever grow back on those sites. Not in ten thousand years. But our people are not even allowed to go into the mountains to dig it anymore. And it's, honestly, it's very telling of what's going on. The people don't matter. Let the corporations do whatever they want.

Just right here around me I've got elders that I've been around every day, all my life. When my grandfather passed on, they adopted me. You know, I'm now their granddaughter, and I'm thirty-nine years old. It's the sense of community here that makes it more home than anything else. The geographic location, I love it here. I think the mountains are beautiful. I can sit on my front porch and just look over a wide veranda of mountains that just absolutely is breathtaking. And that has always made me feel secure here in my home. As far as the people around me here, I know everyone here. I can drive for fifty square miles any direction, and I guarantee you if I get thirsty or hungry there's a neighbor that I can knock on their door, "Hey. . . ." You know, or if I get a flat tire. That's the kind of community that we live in. The people here are different. You're not going to find people like this in other places. The people here will openly invite you into their homes, be good to you, offer you a warm place to sleep, offer you warm food to eat, water to drink. They will openly share their life with you. And you won't find people like this anywhere else in the United States. And honestly, I think society has bred this out of the humankind in the United States. It's just not in human nature to share anything anymore, you know. It's all in who can hoard the most the quickest. But here it's different. The people here are very kind, loving, giving people that have been taken advantage of for the past hundred and thirty years.

I sit right here at my home every day and I see U-Hauls headed up and down the road with people moving out. And I see it happening right here,

right now. I try my best to stop it. I talk to people and say, "Please don't sell out [to the coal company]. If you sell out, not only are you selling out your homeplace, but you're also selling out your neighbors. You're selling out your community." Yeah, it's hell to stay, but if we can stay, then we can eventually put them out. The coal companies are attacking the citizens here and making life so hard on them that they have to leave.

Whitesville is an example of what happens when you depopulate communities. The people that lived in Whitesville, say fifty years ago, made that community what it was. Those people were the people that had been there for generation on top of generation on top of generation. And they've left. The people that was there, the families that grew up there, they've left. There're still a few of them dotted here and there, but most of them's left. And there you take the community out of the community. When you take the people out that has been there for generation on top of generation, when you take them out, the sense of community is gone. You take the kinship out of the community, so you don't have that close knit community like we have here. And that's one reason I'm fighting so hard to save it.

My family was here long before they started mining coal. And why should we have to leave? Who in the hell are they to think they can put us out? They make excuses, they call our area blighted. You know, they say, "Oh it's such a poor area." Well, start bringing something back! You know, everything that's ever left this county's left, and nothing's ever come back. Now everybody in the political régime in the state of West Virginia is looking at places like Boone County and going, "Oh, that place is so poor," like they don't know what's happened! They have sucked this place dry, and they want to set back and act like mountaintop removal and flat land isn't the reason that our area is so poor. That is such crap. Our place, before they started mining coal, the people here were wealthier than they are now. My third great-grandfather worked as a merchant, and he supplied these stores up and down through here. It was a dirt road at the time. On horse and buggy, he supplied these stores up and down through here with goods. He was a pretty wealthy man. He owned fourteen hundred acres, by the way, which was robbed from him up around Rock Creek, which is one of the biggest mining complexes in the county now. And my third great-grandmother fought the logging companies over that fourteen hundred acres. So, this has been going on for 130 years. It is a plan that has, it has been carefully planned every step of the way. For the past 130 years, they have planned on depopulating these areas, and they have slowly done it.

“There’s nights that there is no sleep”:

Backlash in the Community

Maria’s choice to become an environmental justice activist has come at a cost: peace of mind. Threats, name-calling, and affronts to the safety of her family are all aspects of life that Maria deals with on a daily basis.

When I first started doing this, I worked at a local restaurant here. I took the job initially just to pay off my grandfather’s funeral expenses. I had no intentions of keeping it as long as I did. But I had a lot of threats. A lot of it started taking place there. When they found out, some of the customers and the people I worked for, when they found out what I was doing, of course they had problems with it. And it started cutting into my job. The people that I worked for cut me back to working one day a week.

I have been accused of—and this is such a man’s idea of things—I have been accused of sleeping around with local law enforcement. It’s just completely, totally ridiculous. And I mean, that’s one way of putting us [activists] in a bad light. When you run out of everything else to say, bring that up. It’ll work every time. And that’s what it is—they really can’t find anything to say about us. We’re parents, we’re good parents at that. We take care of our children, we see to it our children has got the necessities in life, and we see to it that they are educated beyond what these rural schools are able to educate them. And really, it’s always a gender attack. When I run into a strip miner and they have a problem with me, I’m always a “bitch” or a “whore,” you know, something to that effect. I’ve been called a “loud-mouth woman.”

I can sit here right now, unknowingly, there could be someone vandalizing some aspect of my life. Like my home. It’s not much, but it’s all I got and it’s all I want. You know, me and my husband haven’t been out to dinner together in probably two years because of the fact we can’t leave our home. You’re afraid to leave your home because, I mean, there’s so many people here that has been fighting the coal industry and they got put out of the fight because their house was burnt to the ground. That’s a very common thing here—houses burning. There’s always somebody here; my home is never left alone. If I’m not here, my husband’s here. And I’ve got Rottweilers—I’ve got big dogs. We’ve always had big dogs around here. When somebody is here that’s not supposed to be here, they know what’s going on. My dogs at night are untied and left to guard while we sleep. There’s nights that there is no sleep. You never know. I could go over and get my truck right now and go to drive down the road and there could be something wrong with it, I may not make it out of the driveway. You know, because my truck is about five hundred yards [away], I can’t even see my truck from where my house

sits. So it's a target. It's big, it's red, and it's got lots of [anti-mountaintop removal] stickers on it, and that makes it a target. People spit on my truck all the time because I got stickers on my truck. So I end up with lots of tobacco juice on my truck.

I had a tire that was slashed completely across. I hit a pothole, and it literally blew the tire completely off the rim. Brand new tires, too. Me and my kids [were] expecting absolutely nothing to happen to the vehicle, and my tire blows off when we were in the middle of a curve. I drive a pickup truck, and it just went fishtailing all over the road when the tire blew off the rim. And then, in 2004—my truck was new so there was no reason for it to be running bad—and it was like it wouldn't take gas. I was like, "What in the world's going on with my truck?" So I took it to a mechanic, and I've only got one mechanic that works on my truck. I took it to the mechanic and he told me, he said, "Somebody has attempted to vandalize your truck [by putting sand in the gas tank]." He said, "And the way that your truck is designed is the only thing that kept it from blowing up your engine." As the gas came out of the tank it had a filter, and as it went into the fuel injectors it had a filter. So those filters caught all of the sand and stopped up before the sand made it into my engine. So, through taking the gas tank, dropping everything underneath it, taking it all out, flushing it out, replacing parts—it took probably about three or four months for me to get my truck back to running right. And through all this, my mechanic also notices that my brake line was collapsed to the point that, if enough pressure would build up behind it, I could hit my brake and my brake line would rupture and I would have no brake. There were strikes on the rear end of the vehicle, like with maybe some kind of tool, like a piece of metal. There were strikes on it where they had struck at it two or three times, and they missed and they missed, and then they finally hit it. And when they did, it was collapsed, I mean to the point that I really, I don't know how I had brakes. You know, and he wasn't looking for this when he found it. But thank God he found it, because if he hadn't found it, especially here in this terrain you have a lot of mountain roads, no guardrails, and if you lose your brakes, you're going over a mountain. You're going over a mountain or into a mountain.

And then after that, it's just been numerous things. There've been people seeing my kids getting out of my truck, and I'll pull away, be dropping them off somewhere, I'll pull away and then they start yelling things out at my kids, calling my kids tree-huggers, you know, and things like that. Everywhere I go, I get the finger, everywhere. I come back from New York here not too long ago, and as I come up the road, it was either they was waving at me or they were giving me the finger, every car that went by. It was one or the

other. But, you know, that don't hurt me. It takes a whole lot more than that to get to me.

Just here recently, there was an incident on a parking lot down at Magic Mart, which is maybe ten, fifteen miles down below where I live at. It's the local department store. And myself and my daughter was setting there alongside of the road. We had went into Subway to get us lunch, and we pulled along into this little shady spot alongside of the road to eat. We was setting there, and all of a sudden there's a truck, a big truck, much bigger than mine, come real slow, real close to my truck. Over my shoulder I was like, "Well, what is that?" I turned and looked and there was this man setting in the truck, and he was reading my stickers on my truck. And all of a sudden I see arms a-flyng and his head starts flailing around in the truck, and I'm going, "What in the world?" And I realized that the man obviously has a problem with my stickers. And he just starts, I mean he's just going off, literally. And he had his windows up, so I couldn't hear a word he was saying, but I could tell there was a problem inside the cab of that truck. And he circles the parking lot and he comes, first he throws his hands out to the side and he says, "Fuck you, bitch!" like that. He turns around, circles the parking lot, and comes back in behind me again, and I see him, he's got a paper and he's back there writing down my plate, my license plate number and all this information. I opened up my truck door and turned to the side, and I'm sitting there looking at him. You know, eating my sandwich and, while he's writing down his information. He sees that I'm turned sideways and now looking him in the face, watching what he's doing, and he pulls up alongside of the truck and he holds up a sign that says, "My family depends on coal." Well you'd have thought somebody set a fire in my truck seat, because I came out of it pissed off with a mouthful of sandwich! That was it, I had had it at that point. And I just, basically I told him, I said, "This ain't about you and your family. It's about me and mine." That pissed me off. He thought he was going to stand there and talk to me like that in front of my daughter. And I just basically told him, "No, this ain't about you, it ain't about your job, it's about me and my family and our health and our well-being." And he got very angry, he got very upset. And he took his cell phone, and he never did step out of the truck, he never once, he would not step out of that truck. He didn't want to discuss it, he just wanted me to hear what he had to say, but he didn't want to hear nothing I had to say. I took a pretty big offense to it. And yet there's always another one waiting. You know, always. Everywhere you go.

A lot of people believe that we are out to destroy coal mining. And that's a misunderstanding that people commonly have. If I was out to destroy coal

mining, I'd be putting my own brothers out of work. So there's no truth to that. We're out to make them enforce the laws, is what we're out to do. These laws protect our safety and well-being in our communities. We have to.

“The Women Are More Fierce”:

Women's Leadership in Environmental Justice Activism

Women involved in environmental justice activism are challenging the traditional gender ideology of the region through their leadership and activism. When asked why she believes women are at the front lines of the movement for justice in Appalachian mountain communities, Maria articulated her belief that women's identities as mothers are central to their motivations for action.

The Appalachian women are the backbone behind the Appalachian family. And our Appalachian families are being put in danger. And—it's our natural instinct to step up to the plate and say, “Excuse me, but you're killing something I love.” You know, and we will fight for it. That is our link to who we are. And it's a link to who our children are. And we can't allow it to be destroyed. As mothers of future generations of Appalachian boys and girls, we can't allow them to steal this from our children—it's too precious. And it can't be replaced.

It's real hard to intimidate a mother bear away from her cubs—almost impossible. But the first thing the father bear does is hit the road. You know what I'm saying? The men do not feel the sense of dedication that we do. Most mothers on the face of the earth would be willing to lay down their lives for their children. And I'm definitely one of those mothers. The men are just . . . the men are more easily intimidated by the workers and the people in the coal industry, too. I think that's a serious concern because of the fact that miners—the male, men, strip miners—are more likely to jump onto a man than they are a woman. The men here that work in the movement realize that they're more targets than what the women are. The women are stronger, and they're more likely to speak out when something they love is being destroyed or harmed.

The women are more fierce. They really are. The reason is they're more responsible and obligated to the future, mainly because of the fact that the future holds their children's health, their children's well-being. As a mother, you have to realize that a part of seeing to it that your child grows up in a safe environment is seeing to it that the environment is tended to and not done the way that it is now. People are connected to this environment. Their health is connected to this environment. When you see your kids' water—future water—being polluted so that you can keep your lights on, it just becomes

a no-brainer. All of a sudden, lights aren't that important anymore—and I really think that women see that. Men don't see that. Men can be made to understand that, but I really don't think that it's in a man's instincts to see that. I really believe that it's the mother's instincts that makes you realize how detrimental what's going on is to our children's future. Men and women are as different as day and night, especially when it comes to this fight. Women are relentless.

Transformations through Activism

Both in her own life and in the lives of other women activists, Maria has found that being involved in the environmental justice movement can bring about growth and change in activists' personal lives and relationships.

Back years ago you couldn't have told me that this country was as corrupt as it is right now. Working as an activist from southern West Virginia fighting mountaintop-removal coal mining has taught me more about the corruption in the political system in the United States of America and other countries than I ever dreamed that I'd ever know. And it's changed things, it's changed me too, as far as the way that I've raised my children. My children are avid news readers. They read a lot of world news. My son, my daughter, both watch world news, and not Fox News. And my children can recognize the media's attempt to mislead the public. I mean, and most kids don't pick up on that, and my kids can see it a mile away. "That's one of Bush's plans right there," you know. Or, "Oh my God, look at that commercial. That's sick. How can they get by with that?" You know, it's really changed the way that I have thought about things, and it's also changed the way I've brought up my children. Dramatically. And it's changed me as a person, too.

Working in this kind of work, it teaches you so much about getting along with other people and being able to resolve what seems to be the most serious problems. It teaches you how to be able to sit down and talk about these things and come to resolutions that work for everybody. It teaches you a lot. We have trainings—we have nonviolent trainings, we have media trainings. We have conflict resolution trainings. I mean, just everything you could imagine. It really teaches you how to better handle things in life. And I believe that the trainings have, they've been applied to more than the coal aspect of life. In some cases, it has really restructured households. It's pretty amazing to watch some of it come together. When you see someone that's been beaten down, that's in fear of their home life, and you see them stand up and literally take on the world, it just absolutely makes you so proud to be a part of that

transition. It's just amazing to be a part of it—to see them go from somebody that you could literally stand and talk down to, and they wouldn't say a word back to you, to being the first one to jump up in your face is just like, I mean, it makes you so proud. As an organizer, it really does. To see anybody in that situation just really, quite honestly, appalls me—I don't think anyone should be controlled by anyone else, whether it be a political power or a husband or a wife. There've been women that's worked as volunteers [in the movement] that has been in bad situations at home that's come out of it like warriors. [They have] literally taken themselves by the bootstraps and pulled themselves up out of the gutter and looked at their man and said, "We're not doing this anymore" and has taken her life in her own hands and changed things. I think [most of them have] pretty much been able to reshuffle how things work in the household. And that is a true success—one that don't land in divorce is of course a success. To see someone take that control back over their life is invigorating, to say the least. I really think that it creates a sense of power when you see that a minimal amount of work that you can do can bring about a huge change. It creates an internal power that makes you feel like you can literally take on the world, and no one can convince you that you can't take on the world. It creates an internal power that can't be stopped.

Preserving Appalachia for Future Generations

The coal-mining region of southern West Virginia is often looked down upon by people living in other regions of the state. Maria continually finds herself needing to defend her home to the many individuals who view this region as "blighted" and worthless. Maria and other local residents find a great deal of value in the lifestyle, landscape, heritage, and culture of the area. Many, like Maria, are enraged by the ways in which the lives and choices of residents living in southern West Virginia are devalued and disrespected.

We have just as much right to be who we are and where we are as anyone in America. We're more connected to our land than most people are. The thought of there never being another generation of hillbilly children makes my skin crawl. You've got Boone County, you've got Logan County, you've got McDowell County, and each one of them's different. Their dialect's different. And the more southern you go, the more the dialect is noticeable. Their language, it changes. And I just, I can't imagine there not being any more kids raised in the hollows of McDowell County, because, I mean, we're different. You know what I mean? They want to breed the hillbilly out of the West Virginians. They want this land. And if they have to make it look like the people here are not smart enough to realize that they have a "bad life"—by

whose standards? “There’s something wrong with them people. They don’t realize how horrible their life is.” You know, it’s ridiculous. Who’s to say—and I’m pretty sure that God’s the only one that has this authority—who’s to say who’s living life right or wrong? If the people in McDowell County and the people in Boone County and Logan County and Mingo County, the southern part of West Virginia, if they continue to sell out and move out, they are selling out their children’s heritage. The things that make us as adults the proud hillbillies that we are—and we are—I’m very proud to be a hillbilly. You can call me hillbilly anytime you want, just don’t call me stupid. That’s the way I feel about it. I’ve never met a stupid hillbilly. In order to be a hillbilly, you had to be smart because you had to survive. Just the thought of there not being any more people like us, well of course, that’s what the political leaders want. They want people that can be led around by the nose. Well, we can’t be led around by the nose, and that’s the reason they want to do away with strong-willed people like us.

The culture and heritage is not to be ashamed of. Over the years, people in southern West Virginia, and other parts of Appalachia, have been shamed for the way that they lived because they chose to live with the well-drawn water, and they chose to live growing their gardens, and they chose to live on farms, you know, supplying their own food and taking care of themselves. For years, people were shamed for doing that. You know, “Well, that’s just them poor inbred hillbillies that choose not to leave the holler.” You know, and people were shamed for it. And now OVEC [Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition] is giving them the sense of pride back—the pride of what we are, and who we are, and where we come from. I think the biggest benefit that people get from OVEC, and the other groups, I think the biggest benefit is a sense of community. We’re hillbillies, yes, but we’re not stupid hillbillies. We’re very smart. When the rest of the world crumbles, when the grid crumbles, they’ll be coming to us: “Now how was it you growed your garden?” You know, “How was it you took care of your family?” Times will change. And I see, honestly, I see the people in the state of West Virginia being survivors under any circumstances because we’ve already been survivors under very hard and almost impossible circumstances.

I don’t expect no reward or award or anything like that for the work I do. I expect for my children to have a better life than what I have. And that’s what I want. I want my grandchildren to be able to run and play in the yard. And you know, I want my grandchildren to be able to play in the streams. I want life to turn around to where it can be simple again, and I sure can’t accept my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren living in an environment where there’s no air and there’s no water, and there’s no land.

I can't imagine that kind of life. But I really believe that that's the ultimate award—what will benefit the future generations. I don't think in my lifetime, I don't think that there'll be that much change. But I think what I do with my lifetime will bring about a renewable energy future for my children.

Appearing in numerous documentary films, speaking at press conferences and protests, and testifying before congressional hearings, Maria has continued to be an outspoken advocate for Appalachian communities. Her impassioned speeches have moved many to act on behalf of mountain communities; however, Maria's ability to inspire others has also been viewed as a threat by many coal-industry advocates. The events of June 1, 2012, demonstrate just how great a threat she is perceived to be. Maria was invited to testify on this day before the House Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources about the impacts of mountaintop-removal coal mining. As part of her presentation, she included a slideshow of photographs revealing the costs of this type of coal extraction on Central Appalachian citizens. Among these photographs were images of floods caused by mountaintop-removal mining, orange acid mine drainage polluting West Virginia streams, coal-slurry-contaminated well water pouring from the faucets in people's homes, and a powerful image by professional photographer Katie Falkenberg of a young girl in a bathtub filled with rust-colored water, water that is polluted with toxins from neighboring coal-mining operations. Despite having the permission of the girls' parents and the photographer to show the image during her testimony, Maria Gunnoe was told to remove the photograph from her presentation at the direction of Representative Doug Lamborn (R-Colorado), the Chair of the Subcommittee, because he and others "felt it was 'inappropriate'" (Goodell 2012). Immediately after testifying, Maria was escorted to a private room by a special agent with the U.S. Capitol Police and was questioned for forty-five minutes about the photograph. She was informed that she had been reported to be in possession of "child pornography" and that the Capitol Police were obligated to investigate that accusation.

In the days that followed the hearing, news of what many asserted was clearly an attempt to smear Maria's character spread quickly through various national media outlets. In an interview that appeared in *Rolling Stone* on June 7, Maria recounts the experience, stating that accusing her of possessing child pornography "was an act of desperation, and it showed these congressmen's true colors. They would have done anything to stop that photo from being displayed during this hearing. . . . And it wasn't because the little girl didn't have a shirt on. It was because she was bathing in mine waste" (Goodell 2012).

As journalists and activists have pointed out, Representative Lamborn "has long kept close ties to coal" (McDonnell 2012), which is a powerful industry in his home state of Colorado. In fact, as McDonnell reveals, last year Lamborn gave a keynote address to the American Coal Council, during which he decried what he referred to as President Obama's "war on coal."

Despite this latest attempt to intimidate Maria, she—as always—vows she will not back down. When asked if the events of June 1 scared her, she responded,

“No, it’s made me angry. I know I have to stand up and defend not only my name but my character. I work with many children throughout southern Appalachia, and I’m not going to let this be defined as anything but what it is—obscene. This whole thing is obscene. What’s most obscene is the idea of a little girl bathing in poisoned water. But that’s what’s happening in southern Appalachia, and people need to know about it. And we need to stop it” (Goodell 2012).