

## Sr. Beth Davies - Nun lives 'on the margins' in Appalachia



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By Jean Denton - 3/6/2008

RICHMOND, Va. (The Catholic Virginian) - The old man wistfully looked out from his front porch in St. Charles, Virginia, an Appalachian community eviscerated by decades of coal production.

AIDING RECOVERY - [Sister Beth Davies](#) stands at the New Beginnings residential treatment center in Dryden with Larry Lavendar, director of the center. She is on the staff with him in addition to running the Addiction Education Center in Pennington Gap.

“You know, they came in here and they took our trees and they took our coal,” he said, “but I thought there was one thing they never could take.”

He paused when his eyes suddenly welled with tears that rolled down his face. His voice quavered, “But now they have even taken our mountains.” Sister Beth Davies sat and wept with him over the latest insult to the Appalachian ecology – “mountaintop removal.”

Coal companies have come and gone and come back again to the region, repeatedly promising economic opportunity but often bringing with it heavy environmental and social fallout.

The lament of the old man on his porch, Sister Beth noted, illustrates that the people of Appalachia “understand very well: what you do to our land, you do to us.”

Standing side by side

For more than 35 years Sister Beth, a nun of the Congregation of Notre Dame, has lived with the people in Virginia’s coalfields, walking their walk as they’ve struggled against exploitation and impoverishment in their beloved, magnificent mountains.

She has stood in picket lines with striking miners and their families when the local coal company tried to take away their benefits.

She helped the long underserved community develop a network of medical clinics. She worked for environmental protection including legislation to restrict strip mining. She fought the intrusion of maximum-security prisons as an economic development strategy.

Primarily she has worked to build effective programs and facilities to treat substance abuse and addiction, for which the depressed region is prime breeding ground. Having arrived in Lee County in 1972, Sister Beth is quick to point out that she is just one among many who have come to Appalachia to join the region's struggle.

### **Collaboration in ministry**

More than 40 women religious have served in the segment of the region that lies within the Diocese of Richmond. They have labored for the cause alongside numerous priests and lay people including social service providers, doctors and other health care professionals and community organizers.

Mostly, though, they have labored with the local people whose roots run deep in the mountain region that stretches across 15 states.

Sister Beth said she learned early on that "whatever gifts I bring are useful only in collaboration with those that are already here, because we can only be effective when the whole community is working together."

She was first drawn to Appalachia by the poverty she had witnessed during a visit to the region in 1971. At the time she had been principal of a Catholic high school in Connecticut.

But her vows with a religious community that espoused "living provisionally," that is in trust that God will provide what is needed, called her to something more that "had been going on inside of me for some time."

Now, looking back, she realizes that her desire to "live on the margins" with the people in Lee County led her to an ever-deepening understanding of the Christian Gospel.

"The closer you get to the living experience of people 'on the fringes,' the better perspective you get of the core of our society," she said.

“What the Gospel is saying to us on every issue is that Jesus was never exclusive. Everyone was invited to his table. That’s why he was so railed against by the privileged, because he embraced those on the margins, those who were exploited.”

### **Early rejection**

Being “on the margins” had an unexpected connotation for Sister Beth and her two fellow CNDs when they first arrived in St. Charles. She and Sisters Barbara Topazio and Claudette LaBrie faced serious discrimination from the community for two reasons: they were “Yankees,” and they were Catholic.

Gradually, though, they got to know the local residents and were accepted in the community.

Two Glenmary priests were instrumental in bringing the sisters and introducing them to the community. Father Frank Korcinek and Father Les Schmidt had been ministering in the region for years and had long desired a “Catholic presence” in Lee County.

The sisters, Benedictine Father Tim Welsh, who was at Sacred Heart Church in Big Stone Gap, and Brother Peter, a member of the Little Brothers of the Gospel who came to work with the people in the coal mines, formed a community of support that met weekly for many years and “grounded us spiritually,” Sister Beth explained. Typical of women religious who came to the area at the time, the sisters didn’t have a specific assigned task when they arrived.

Sister Beth noted that in 1972 federal government money was coming into the county through the War on Poverty program and a local leader, Jim Fulks, was coordinating much of the area’s social services through the Lonesome Pine Development Center.

“When we met with him he seemed a bit skeptical,” Sister Beth recalled. “He said, ‘What do you want to do?’ “I told him that only by listening to the people here will we know what to do, and he said, ‘You’re welcome here.’ ”

### **It takes a community**

Sister Beth soon learned how the spirit of community works to provide for its people in Appalachia. Recollecting the ‘70s as a period when young people were highly interested in social justice, she said that Vanderbilt University medical students were providing summer health fairs to poor communities in the region. They were particularly interested in Lee County “because it was so medically underserved,” she explained.

The Federation of Communities, a regional interested group of men and women, started by several former Glenmary sisters and teachers, asked Sister Beth to help bring the Vanderbilt group to Lee County. The medical students made three visits offering information before they were specifically invited by the community to stage a health fair.

After each presentation, the assembled local people remained silent until the third time when one woman pointed out how the presence of a doctor could have saved many lives in a recent mining accident.

“All it took was one person,” Sister Beth recalled, “and then they all began to share their personal stories about the lack of medical care.”

During the summer’s health fair, nurses stayed in private homes learning first-hand the difficulties of families with no running water in their houses. The medical team trained local residents in intake and other support services of the clinic to which people came from all over the area. As a result, the community formed the St. Charles Health Council which soon established a permanent local clinic in a building constructed by retired miners. Over the years it grew into a network of clinics for low-income families.

The town of St. Charles, economically depressed when abandoned by the coal industry in the ‘70s, had “come alive” in its effort to provide for its own health care needs. Sister Beth said the local clinic became affectionately known as “the Nickel and Dime Clinic” since house-to-house fundraising commonly recorded donations of 25 and 50 cents. Miners also dedicated a portion of their paychecks to support the facility.

Dr. Art VanZee, a Vanderbilt graduate, moved to Lee County to open his medical practice and ever since has been a mainstay and ardent spokesman for health care needs in the community.

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## **15 Sisters now serve in Appalachia**

The first religious sisters to serve in southwest Virginia's Appalachian region were the Poor Servants of the Mother of God who came in 1948 at the request of the Glenmary missionaries who had arrived only three years earlier.

This group, known as "the hospital sisters," took on operation of the medical clinic in Norton which became St. Mary's Hospital. The SMGs served there until 2003.

Including the hospital sisters more than 40 have served in southwest Virginia since the 1970s, according to [Sr. Jackie Hanrahan](#), director of the diocesan Appalachian Office of Justice and Peace in St. Paul.

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**Currently 15 women religious minister in various capacities throughout the Appalachian region of the Richmond Diocese, they are:**

– [Sister Beth Davies, CND](#), profiled above, who since 1972 has been coordinating substance abuse programs and prison ministry in Lee County; Sisters Margaret Flynn, OP, and Beth Jaspers, OP, who serve in Wise County have also been in the region since the 1970s as has Sr. Bernadette Kenney, MMM, who established the St. Mary's Health Wagon that provides service to the indigent in Wise, Buchanan and Dickenson counties.

– [Sr. Pauline Champagne, DHS](#), and Sr. Mary Hecker, SSND, are in Hurley in Buchanan County and Sr. Jean Korkisch, CHC, serves in Dickenson County. They all came in the early 1980s as did Sr. Jackie.

– Sr. Stephanie Ward, OSF, is director of the diocese's Jubilee House Retreat Center in Abingdon; Josepha Haskins, RSM, and Martha Meyer, RSM, are in Tazewell County and Sr. Jane McDowell, HM, serves in Pocohantas also in Tazewell County.

– Sr. Clare McBrien, RSHM, recently retired as ecology educator for the diocese, and Sr. Maria Timony, RSHM, who provides legal assistance to low-income families, are both in Wytheville. Sr. Frances Barber, SNJM, serves in Bland County. Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary (276) 686-5093, P.O. Box 882, Wytheville, VA 24382-0882