

## 21.03.27 A Woman's Place Hour.wav

SM: Sarah McConnell  
LU: Lori Underwood  
DH: Dawn Hutchinson  
ZM: Zakia McKensey  
CH: Caroline Hasenyager  
JC: Jayme Canty  
SB: Shannon Bell

[00:00:00]

*[Marchers chanting in the background]*

SM The Women's March in January 2017 was the largest single day protest in U.S. history. Anywhere from three to five million Americans, most of them women, took to the streets.

*[chanting continues]*

Women around the world chimed in.

*[Chanting continued]*

This massive event made it clear that women's activism is hard to pin down. Protesters showed up for a wide range of issues, including immigrant rights, LGBTQ+ rights, police violence against black people, support for science. The list goes on.

LU Economic empowerment, caring for victims of gender based violence, contributing to community or local governance. All of these can lead to dramatic transformation in the lives of women and girls. Where they live, where they work, where they plan for their futures. And we want to say that that's activism in its purest form.

SM From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today on the show, The Dynamic World of Women's Activism.

*[Chanting concludes]*

SM In 2014, Taylor Swift came out as a feminist and it was a big deal. These days, it would be more surprising to hear a major pop star say she isn't a feminist. Young women are embracing activism and changing the women's movement. Lori Underwood and Dawn Hutchinson are professors at Christopher Newport University. They co-edited a book on social change and women's activism around the world and joined me to share what they learned from the collection.

Lori, this collection looks at women's activism across time. How do we even begin to wrap our heads around such a big topic as women's activism?

LU I think first you have to think about activism in general and then start thinking about how women's activism participates in that and then how it diverges. So activism, of course, has many forms and the forms we're most familiar with are, you know, lobbying, media, journalistic activism, petition and protest, and women certainly participate in all of those forms of activism throughout the world, but there are subtleties and complexities to many forms of women's activism and I think it's important to acknowledge that women's movements differ from culture to culture and in different parts of the world. And so sometimes you'll see women's movements embedded in neighborhoods and not going outside those neighborhoods. When we think about women's activism, we think of it very inclusively economic empowerment, caring for victims of gender based violence, contributing to community or local governance. All of these can lead to dramatic transformation in the lives of women and girls, where they live, where they work, where they plan for their futures. And we want to say that that's activism in its purest form.

DH As Lori said, I think the term women can be more inclusive, um, just as feminism has grown more inclusive over the years. And activism itself is more complex than we usually think of it, as as Lori was saying, it can include traditional big actions like protesting and street marches, um, things like that. But it can also include more everyday actions, computer hacking or economic boycotting, um, sit ins or um, creating posters or writing letters to lawmakers or social media campaigns like the Me Too Movement, right? Or Blog zines, like Feministing, things like that. So there's lots of ways to be an activist, I think.

SM The first essay in the collection looks at forced sterilization in Peru. That's an issue that's come up more recently in our country because of the reports of forced sterilizations of immigrants in detention centers. What is the story that scholar is telling?

LU Um, Rebecca Irons is telling us about both access to healthcare for women in Peru, which has improved, but it's really primarily only improved for wealthy, white women in Peru. There has been a history in recent times, 1990 to 2000, of an active government sanctioned program to sterilize nearly 300,000 indigenous and poor women in the country. And when we think about forced sterilization, most people consider this to be an artifact of the past, of eugenics, of social Darwinism. And what this scholar points out is that it isn't an artifact of the past. It's still happening and it's happening to women of color and poor women. And she asks to be very conscious that as we're making progress in women's rights, that we are not concentrating those rights in the hands of the white and the wealthy. And as she points out, this is an ongoing responsibility for all people because Peru continues to make progress and now there is access to free emergency birth control for all women. But again, there are targets that we want to make sure that this-these products get into the hands of indigenous women. And there are, again, quotas that health officials are expected to meet. There's that same consciousness that we want to be redesigning the population and as you pointed out, we're still practicing some of this in our own country. So what it asks us to keep in mind is that the mistakes of the past are not still in the past. And when we get in mind that the job of feminism is done, we're making a grave error.

SM Tell me about another one of the essays in the collection that really stayed with you.

LU I also found interesting the article by Paula Talero on the media and resisting seeing the media as victimizing young women. Young women are very media savvy. They're perfectly capable of reading a book or watching a movie, um, uh, listening to a story and constructing their own meaning out of that.

SM True, but there was a time when people were complaining about how young women might see themselves in cartoons and movies and books where there wasn't much alternative to what they were getting as waiting for your prince to come. Now you've got Moana, you know, steering her boat across the world and saving her people.

LU Yes!

SM So it's easy to say women can decide for themselves, but it's nice that women who've come before us have insisted there be these other stories.

LU I agree. And what's interesting is that scholars are actually critical of both the Moana's and the Sleeping Beauty's because they say the Moana's suggest that you can overcome everything as an individual Supergirl, and you don't need to participate in the collective struggle for womankind. And they criticize the Sleeping Beauty's, of course, for their passiveness, uh, but I think the interesting point that this scholar makes is a young woman is smart, she's savvy, she understands that these are both stories and she can respond to them both as a free thinker, as a critical thinker, and that we need to give our young women credit for the ability to do that. And I think that's a wonderful message.

SM Do students these days identify with feminism or do they push back or do they say we're beyond feminism?

DH Yeah, we've, we've had a lot of discussions about that this semester. I would say about two thirds of the class embrace it with their own definition, like they choose a definition and say, I'm embracing the term, but this is what I mean by the term. And then I have a few, there's a few that are like "no, I still don't like the word" because they still see it as a second wave, meaning the-what they perceive to be less inclusive. So they don't believe that includes all kinds of women and people who don't maybe see themselves as women, but they want it to include everybody.

SM Do you think younger women are actually leading the way, whereas it was older women two decades before?

LU I do think so. I think we're seeing a lot more enthusiasm from younger women. And I also think that the definition of woman is evolving. I think you're seeing younger women lead the way and I think you're seeing them embrace and bring with them the importance of the rights of transgender women as this new horizon of protection and, and activism and it's not unidirectional, of course, but I think that's where the enthusiasm and the activism are grounded right now.

SM Lori Underwood is Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities and Professor of Philosophy at Christopher Newport University. Dawn Hutchinson is Senior Lecturer in Religion at Christopher Newport University. Their book is "Women Social Change and Activism, Then and Now."

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SM Feminist movements weren't always inclusive of LGBTQ people, and some people who call themselves feminists don't accept trans women as part of the movement. But Zakia McKenney says when you're not happy with the seat you're given at a table, you create your own tables. And that's what she's done with her organization, Nationz Foundation, in Richmond, Virginia. Her work with LGBTQ+ communities goes far beyond protest, addressing a wide range of day to day needs from mental health support services to food and rent assistance. Zakia, how did you come to not just simply stand up for yourself, but really embrace activism on behalf of others? What first motivated you down this path?

ZM I honestly, you know, accredit everything to my grandmother. My grandmother was one who loved people and instilled that in me and told me when I tell her who I was, um, before I transitioned and who I wanted to be, she was like "be the best that I can be," and through my life experiences, dealing with homelessness, dealing with being unemployed, taking my pain and turning it into triumphs. And triumphs for my community and change for my community.

SM You've been an activist working for the LGBTQ+ community for many years now. Do you remember when you first realized I am an activist?

ZM When I was a performer. I was very much into pageantry and female impersonation and I used to use my voice in those platforms to shape change because of the platform that I had as an entertainer. So I would say it was probably like the early 90s, um, '92, '93 when I really realized the power in my voice.

SM What do you mean by the power in your voice? You were popular. People loved listening to you and they paid attention.

ZM Yes. They did.

SM How'd you realize that? You know, when you're really young, you don't even know what that power is yet.

ZM Right. Back then, HIV and AIDS was something that was very taboo and when I reference "the power in my voice," it was using that platform as an entertainer to push people to access testing and to create change within the clubs. Using my voice to talk to the owners of the clubs to allow them to come in and do testing, because testing wasn't something that was happening in our clubs and on our scene, but HIV was disproportionately impacting my community. So, having the microphone, um, being able to talk to people and try to erase as much stigma related to HIV and normalize testing, that's when I realized.

SM Do you remember having a moment when you realized "Hey, I'm not backing down. I'm strong"?

ZM Yeah. There were also some times in the club scene that I referenced that a lot because that was a lot of how I made my money before I really got into HIV prevention and education work. But there was some racism that was existing within certain club structures that I performed in. So there's this one club in particular, Godfreys, that I was working at in the 90s, and the owner, he was clearly racist. There were nights that were specifically for people of color. Drinks were higher, um, on those nights. Folks were served out of plastic glasses. And then on nights when it was predominantly, um, crowds that were not of color, the drinks were cheaper. They were served out of glasses, and, you know, I, I made comments about that. And then even in the, like in the show line up, he would be so concerned about it being a white girl, black girl, white girl, black girl. And I just got fed up one day and I was just like "What difference does that make?" You know, when people are watching a show, they want to know who the entertainers, that's next or what music is next. And then I dug a little further and was like, and why is it on Friday nights, you know, we're, we're drinking out of plastic cups and my rhetoric and my mouth, you know, kind of caused me to not work there anymore during that time. But, um, I, I constantly advocated for people to be strong, you know, and not take what he was doing and lay down with, you know what I'm saying? We were being treated poorly and it was a clear line between the difference of folks of color who work there or patronize there and folks who are not of color.

SM Did you have options? Was there another club that was better?

ZM Oh, I was like nationally recognized. So Virginia just was not the end all be all you know I loved working at home, but at that time I had captured a national title and I was the current reigning Miss Black America+ so I was traveling all over the country. But when you're not happy with the seats that you have a certain tables, you create your own tables. And so I had my own little shows on different nights, specifically on nights that competed with his nights, and I just did my own thing and created a space where, um, my people felt appreciated that entertainers were valued for their entertainment value and not judged by the color of their skin.

SM Your organization that you founded, Nationz Foundation, has been open throughout the pandemic. How has your work changed during this period?

ZM So the communities that we serve, you know, are already, before the pandemic, struggling; on the verge of homelessness, unemployed, experiencing violence. So it was crucial to me that we had to be able to meet the needs of the community, so we implemented contactless dropoffs for the food pantry, we implemented drive-up testing so people can come out, just pull up in their cars outside and get tested. We've been helping with a lot of rental assistance, utility assistance, a lot of the support groups that we had. We've actually moved them to a virtual platform so that individuals can be in the comfort of their homes and still get the support that they need from the attendance in those support groups. We've been able to kind of continue on with everything that we've

done, as well as picking up slack for both Richmond City Health Department and Henrico County Health Department.

SM It sounds like the kind of work you've been doing during the pandemic is even costlier than it might be in normal times.

ZM It has been because we, you know, before we were not shipping food out and now we are, so that's, you know, extra postage that we're incurring. And then there were certain, um, platforms that we had to purchase so that, um, our virtual delivery of our programs were better. And then just the need, you know, people are unemployed, um, or people who were already unemployed, who engaged in different things to make money, um, they're not able to, um, engage in those things because of social distancing or because of curfews. And so the demand for our services have been greater and, you know, the, the cost has been greater.

SM What brings you hope in your work? What gets you up in the morning?

ZM [Exhales] Um, I think what gets me up in the morning is the fact that I love what I do. I've done this work for a long time and it wasn't until last July that seeing the changes at DMV in relation to gender identity, to see this recent murder that we had in Richmond where a trans woman was murdered and the police department sent out press releases identifying her as a transgendered woman and not a transvestite or a man in a wig, saying those changes gives me hope, but also each day that I can make a difference.

ZM If it's not, if it's only just one person, um, knowing I've shaped change and help someone to better themselves is what makes me wake up every morning and gives me hope, um, to keep pushing forward and to continue to do better and to continue to, um, be creative and think outside of the box of ways to meet the needs of our people and meet our people where they are.

SM Zakia McKensey is the founder and executive director of Nationz Foundation. Her organization supports the LGBTQ+ community through HIV testing, education, housing, food assistance and more in Richmond, Virginia.

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SM Today, elite women's colleges are often seen as hotbeds of radical activism. It's become a cliché. Caroline Hasenyager says that reputation started early, way back at the turn of the century, when faculty and students were leaders in the progressive movement. Hasenyager is a history professor at Virginia State University.

SM Caroline, there's a famous image from the 1913 Women's Suffrage Parade in D.C. A woman is sitting on a huge white horse wearing a white cape and sort of a crown. Who was she?

CH That was Inez Milholland, who was a Vassar graduate. By that point, she'd been out of college for about five years, and she was one of the kind of celebrity members of the women's suffrage movement. She'd been a suffrage leader at Vassar and was a very

charismatic student. There was a lot of talk about students who kind of hero worshiped her. She had tried to put together a suffrage meeting at Vassar while still a student and the college president told her no, he had been very firm, that suffrage discussion did not belong on campus. And she, with this sort of perfect eye for public relations, says, OK, fine, we'll just take it off campus. And she crosses the property line and holds the suffrage meeting in a local cemetery in Poughkeepsie and of course, invites the press. And this quickly becomes not only the stuff of campus legend, but kind of launches her into the first rank members of the suffrage movement in terms of the people getting public notice. The suffrage movement at that period, or I should say half of it, was trying to reinvent its public image to make it seem kind of younger, hipper, frankly, sexier, and she was really kind of the perfect person to convey that image.

SM Were women's colleges at the time more activist than the men's colleges?

CH Yes, they were, but they were not necessarily hotbeds of suffrage activism, which was something that really tended to surprise people who looked in from the outside. Both people who supported women's suffrage and people who opposed it, looked at these colleges and expected them to be sort of ground zero for the movement and, uh, there were oftentimes, you know, editorials in the press saying this is the most important constituency for the suffrage movement, you know, to convert to their cause. But most of the students themselves at the women's colleges, while they were quite politically active or politically aware in this period, their interests are in sort of social work, the Consumer's League, early kind of passivism movements, they are thinking about suffrage, but they saw it as one of many issues to think about rather than, uh, something that they should be spearheading.

SM So, was the whole idea of a woman going to college, back at the turn of the century and a little before, was the act of going to college a kind of activist move on the part of a woman? Or is it more like they were going to finishing school for the wealthy?

CH Honestly, I think it's neither at that point, because the act of going to college by the turn of the 20th century, it's it's less strange than it had been before. But there are concerns in that the sort of national climate that women's, shall we say, liberation, is maybe moving a little too fast, that too many women are entering the workforce, that middle class women and in particular middle class white women who are the demographic that is dominating these colleges, that they are not marrying soon enough or in greater numbers and not having enough children and certainly higher education and the women's colleges, in particular, are seen as one of the culprits here. There were people who sensed that the women's colleges, which were founded on this idea that women should have the same education as men, there were people who understood that to be a very radical comment. The last part about kind of the finishing school aspect of it, there's this, uh, common misconception, I mean, even today that that is what these schools were and th-they never were that, they were extremely, uh, demanding, uh, institutions with very strict, uh, enrollment standards and this idea of the finishing school takes root, partly as the way of belittling what these women are accomplishing and thus kind of minimizing the threat.

SM Were the colleges at that time only open to white women, white students and white professors?

CH Generally speaking, there was not a formal policy, but that was more or less the de facto situation, certainly with the, th-the highest profile schools and the schools we call the seven sisters now. Uh, there were examples, particularly in the 1910s, nineteen teens, when an African-American student would be admitted to the school, there was often a lot of behind the scenes movement to try and keep her out.

SM Can you sort of describe the political leanings and the cultural leanings of the students? Were they all wealthy? Were they into union and populist activism?

CH By the early 20th century, and the reason I keep coming back to that generation that's in college between about 1900 and 1920, is that is, that's the generation that is most known for its political interests and activism. They're very much interested in things like workers' rights, trade unionism, the Consumer's League, settlement house activity and also women's suffrage, uh, to a lesser degree. One reason for this interest, though, seems to be the influence of the faculty at these schools. They were very much into these, um, social movements. This is sort of the same moment where economics and sociology are becoming commonly taught subjects. And it was quite common for professors to take students to visit settlement houses or to teach classes about, um, the ways in which poverty was an environmental issue and how activism could alleviate, uh, social injustice. So in that respect, the students are very much responding to the influence of the faculty members.

SM Why do you think we pay attention to women's colleges these days in the first place? There are so few now compared to what there once were.

CH One of the things that I've always found fascinating when I have studied these schools is that as a society, we seem to feel that we have a right to review and comment on these institutions, that they belong to us in some way as well, and I think that that is, that is drawn out of, um, an older idea that women still have primary responsibilities, either to the family or to the community or to the nation as a whole, that they need to discharge before they live their lives as individuals. And of course, a college is about educating them to be thinking people and nurturing their own ambitions. And that definitely can make people nervous or, you know, send up some people's sort of spidey sense.

SM Caroline Hasenyager is a history professor at Virginia State University.

SM This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

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SM As she was growing up, Jayme Canty was surrounded by strong black women, but she didn't hear about women like her mother, grandmother and aunts in any of her history classes. It wasn't until she attended North Carolina, A&T, a Historically Black University, that she started to learn about all the black women who've led activist fights

in this country and she wanted to know more. Canty's now a visiting iCloud scholar at Virginia Commonwealth University and she studies Black women's activism in the South.

Jayme, how did attending college at North Carolina A&T open your eyes to the activities of Black women activists in the South?

JC So, we always think about racial liberation in a very traditional way, you know, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and all those people. But, um, in this program, I was introduced to people like Ella Baker and Septima Clark and so many other women that I've never heard of in my life. That shifted and changed me in a way that made me realize, wow, Black women were, we never hear their stories.

SM And you started exploring the activism of college students.

JC Yes.

SM You interviewed six Black female activists from HBCUs in the Atlanta area who had been active in the early 1960s in the student protests. What did you learn from them? What sort of activism had they become involved with?

JC So one of the things I learned from them was that activism is not a one time thing and everybody has a part within this community effort. Like I had one participant who went to the church and wrote the signs. You had one person who was at the front lines, had no problem being in the front lines. You had some people who were at the dorm or at their room just waiting for the phone call so they can call to get help if people needed to get bailed out or needed to get legal help. Um, so it was a multifaceted process, even though we always think of it in a way of like activism, I'm angry, I'm going out in the streets, which, of course, is authentic and is still very valuable. But what is, was so fascinating to me for these women during this time is that it was, uh, it was so much planning and so much foresight and so much that went into it. Another thing in learning is that the activism that they did was not something that they just woke up and decided to do. It was something that was burning within them. It was questions that were not being answered from their childhood. Um, one participant even mentioned how her mother had to hide her brother in the house, they were in Tennessee, because the Klansmen out in Tennessee were looking for someone who looked like him. And her even at that time, thinking, "Why? Why is this happening? Why is this fair? How is it that, you know, my brother has to be hidden in the house?" Um, so when they got to college, it became an opportunity for them to right the wrongs of the past, to find a way to seek the justice that her brother didn't get a chance to seek at that time and things of that sort. Um, so that was another thing I learned. And the fact that black women have always been, essentially, the, have been the workers within these movements, what they would call rank and file activists. The ones with no name, the ones who are doing the footwork, the ones who are planning and things of that sort.

SM Another woman you interviewed was Dr. Georgeann Thomas.

JC Yes. Dr. Thomas informed me of many different things. One, particularly, the dress code. There was no such thing as going out wearing pants and sneakers, you know, you still went out with your stockings and your dress and your shoes. You were dressing as a Spellman woman, even in these activist activities. Another thing that she mentioned was, of course, being burned by Ku Klux Klan members who were trying to stop them from protesting. She was one of the people that was at the front lines who actually had a person put their cigarette butt on her. And so you get so many different accounts and so many different experiences, and that was from hers.

SM Tell me about another woman protester you interviewed, Mary Ann Ruth.

JC Yes. She wrote the appeal for Human Rights. She was one of the authors of that document. And one of the things that she mentioned was that the governor of Georgia did not believe that Black college students wrote that piece. They were writing this appeal before they even started, which is something unique to any other protest that I've seen is that they actually wrote what they were going to do and why they were doing it. They were laying out the inequalities that were taking place in Atlanta, Georgia, with the facilities in Atlanta, Georgia.

SM How central was the church?

JC The church is actually the heartbeat of this political movement. If not for the church, there would not be this drive for social justice because the church acts as a political institution. So even though they knew about the experiences that black people were dealing with in their social life, like in their personal family life, they also saw it in terms of church sermons, church organizations. Even in terms of the songs, the songs that were being sung, um, many times there sung within the church, but the church hymns have a social justice platform within them. They have a heartbeat within them. They give them a sense of encouragement and give them essentially the motivation to keep marching. So even we see it happening even with like the late John Lewis, um, that was one, that's one ways in which we physically see the connection between the church and these movements. He was a, he was a, he wanted to be a preacher, um, and he was a very religious man. And he brought that religiosity to these social justice movements. So there was a lot there are many connections between the church and these protest movements. You couldn't have these protest movements without, it was essentially the heartbeat of these protests.

SM You have a forthcoming book that is tentatively titled Snapping Beans Voices of a Black, Queer Lesbian South. Yes. Tell me about this current research that you're doing where you're looking at the Christian Black Church and the impact it has on the lives of Southern queer black women.

JC Yes, many of these women are heavily involved in the church, still love the church, but also recognizing the church as kind of a hypocritical, patriarchal space, but also seeing where the church becomes a foundation for their families. And in the south in particular, the church isn't always necessarily the physical building, right? The church ends up being manifested in your family.

SM In your research, have you found black queer women interacting with their Southern Christian churches? Are they getting involved in the church's activism?

JC They get involved, whether it is grassroots or whether it is more traditional politics. We start to see them doing that because they're trying to find their rightful place within the south, right? Um, they're trying to expand and challenge our traditional notions of activism and politics and things like that. And they're also trying to live out their lives authentically. There's not necessarily a shying away, right? Whether it is as a masculine centered lesbian, I'm going to decide to wear my tie to a church event, right? I'm going to cut my hair. I'm going to live my life authentically. I'm going to have my girlfriend come with me to something. I'm going to get married. I'm going to have kids. So it's like this, I am going to live my authentic self in this space, right? And they all also recognize that I know that everyone's not going to be OK with me and I'm OK with that. Right? Versus maybe in previous generations it was this I need to be accepted versus now, I don't need to be accepted because I have my community and I have the people who do love me and I have the way I'm au-living my authentic life.

SM Jayme Canty is a visiting iCubed scholar at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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SM Ironweed is a tall purple flower found in the hills of Appalachia. A West Virginian activist named Judy Bonds says Ironweed roots are deep and hard to pull out, just like Appalachian women. In the mountains, men are often stifled by their loyalty to coal mining jobs. So the mothers and grandmothers are forced to become the activists. Shannon Bell is a sociologist at Virginia Tech. She shares the stories of women fighting back against the impacts of coal mining on their Appalachian families.

SM Shannon, in your award winning book, "Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed: Appalachian Women in the Fight for Environmental Justice", you interviewed 12 women activists who lived in and loved Appalachia and fought for their land. Their stories are riveting.

SB They are amazing. And most of them have had some type of encounter with the coal industry. Uh, massive flooding, coal slurry, impoundment breaches and water contamination, coal dust in the air that's affected their health and, and the property values of their homes. And so one of the women that I interviewed, her name is Maria Gunnoe, and she shares a really powerful story of her entry into the movement, really being tied to a massive flood event that happened. Her property, her family property was beneath a massive mountaintop removal coal mine. The trees had been removed and the mountain had been removed. It meant that, um, rain events, what used to be just regular weather rain events, ended up becoming flood events. So I'm just going to read a little bit of her story:

"June the 15th of 2003 was my daughter's birthday. The evening of her birthday, it started raining 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 four

o'clock and by seven o'clock, 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 came up and when it came up, just kept coming up and up and up, washed away about five acres of our property. I lost two access bridges and one of my dogs was killed right up there. There was no way out. We were surrounded by water all night long. You could hear our structures twisting and maiming in the water.

Nothin' like that had ever taken place here. I've played in this yard and water that come up to my knees as a kid and it didn't do that. My family was in this house and I didn't know what else to do. I literally thought we were going to 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. There was no safe place to go. 911 could not get to me, I couldn't get to them. All I had to do at that point was hit my knees right there on the sidewalk and pray to God that the water stopped. And thank God it did, because if it wouldn't have, it would have taken the earth at my house was setting on and me and my family in the process.

After the flood, my daughter went through a, hey, I feel safe in calling it a post-traumatic stress disorder. I found out one morning at three o'clock 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. And I found out then what it was putting my daughter through. 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."

SB So she connected with the local environmental justice group, Coal River Mountain Watch, that was trying to organize folks who had been affected by coal related disasters and, um, and other problems, really trying to connect affected coalfield residents with each other so that they could, um, start to advocate for holding the coal industry accountable.

SM What a powerful story she had. Tell me also about two women who teamed up and came to call themselves the Dust Busters.

SB Yeah. So, um, Pauline Canterbury and Mary Miller, unfortunately, passed away in 2014, but, but Pauline and Mary, for a decade, um, were fighting coal dust in their town of Sylvester. So, um, so after coal is mined, um, it has to be chemically cleaned and crushed in order to prepare it for burning in coal fire power plants. And so often these coal preparation plants are located on or near mountaintop removal coal mines and communities that neighbor plants like this, like the town of Sylvester where Pauline and Mary lived, have to deal with a huge amount of coal dust in the air, um, and c-it can make life unbearable for residents. I mean, Pauline told me, um, that Sylvester was just this amazing, wonderful place to live up until Massey Energy decided to put in this coal preparation plant.

As Pauline says,

You couldn't do nothin' outside. You couldn't have cookouts outside. You couldn't hang your clothes outside when you washed them. It just plastered our homes. Our homes were just polluted completely with it. And I mean, right now, in order to get all the coal dust out of our homes, we're gonna to have to take them apart and rebuild them because there's no way you can get it all out. There's just no way you can do it. So that means we're breathing it constantly

SM Mm. Yes.

SB And Mary has this beautiful brick home, which in the 1990s, um, appraised for a hundred and forty four thousand dollars. But then after the coal preparation plant went in, it appraised for twelve thousand dollars. So their homes lost like 90 percent of their resale value because of this coal preparation plant. So not only was it destroying their health because they were having to breathe this coal dust, but it also meant that even if they had wanted to move, they couldn't because they couldn't sell their homes.

And they sort of went through this experience that I think a lot of folks who are affected by environmental injustices do where they think, OK, well, this is, this is really bad. But I'll just contact the Department of Environmental Protection, you know, that's what they're supposed to be there for, right? I'll just contact them and they'll, you know, make this coal company stop doing what it's doing. And, um, as many people learn, it's not that simple and industry has a lot of power. And so they decided that they were going to start collecting evidence. And they used this, um, as evidence in a lawsuit that they filed against Massey Energy and they ultimately won this lawsuit.

SM That's really amazing. I'm so impressed with their efforts. Another thing that stuns me about what these women were fighting for and against is just how many different ways the coal industry had damaged their lives and their health. Who is the woman whose husband died at 61 of pancreatic cancer? And the doctor said, I know what killed your husband. It's the water, the polluted water from the coal mines.

SB Yeah, that was Joan Lindvall. In many of these communities, the communities are on well water. And I don't know if this was the case with Joan's husband, but I can tell you the story of another community where it was documented that the contamination of their water was from a breach in an underground slurry injection site. And so residents whose water has been contaminated with coal slurry have been found to have high rates of liver cancer, kidney cancer, some brain cancer, gall bladder disease, skin disorders and even organ failure. One of the women I interviewed, Donetta Blankenship, she almost died of liver failure at age 38 because of contaminated water from a slurry injection site. Maria Lambert is another resident, um, who lives in a different community. She lives in the community of Prenter, which is in Boone County, West Virginia. And in 2008, she and other residents of Prenter began to suspect that their well water was contaminated with coal slurry, um, from a nearby slurry injection site. So Maria, um, talks about discovering that their well water was contaminated and how angry that, um, that made her. So she says

My parents found a flier that said they were having a community water meeting and my mom said 'Maria, I really think some of us need to go to this meeting because there's definitely something wrong with our water.' So she, my dad, and I went to the water meeting. Everybody was showing samples of their water. And it's like my whole life flashing before my eyes because my children had lost their teeth, my parents had had cancer, we'd had our gallbladders removed. And all of these things was it's just like, 'oh, no, it's not just us, it's the whole community. And we're not even blood related.'

SB And then she goes on to say that, that she went into the hospital the weekend after that first meeting from intestinal bleeding. She says

They wanted me to go off some of my medication to see if it could be that that was causing it. And I thought, well, since I'm going off medication, I'm just going to go ahead and try to lose some of this weight because I weighed over 200 pounds. I lost 50 pounds by drinking water all summer long. Our water, the water, we should not have been drinking. They tell you lot, drink lots of water, you know. So when I found out that what I thought was supposed to be a good thing made me sick, I got so mad. It was just like an inferno inside me that was just busting to get out. I never really got that mad about anything before this. It just infuriated me to think that my husband had spent twenty three and a half years in the ground, mining coal. My dad had worked for the mining industry for 25 years. My grandfather worked for about 20 something, 30 something years in the mines. His father was killed in the mines. And I know that they gave their all, everything they had, they put into that work.

SM That's so powerful. It gives me chills. It's so striking. These are all women. Were you just looking for women activists or did you find that there is a strong tradition in Appalachia of activist women?

SB Yeah, so I think this is part, the, the fact that there are so many women, especially local women, at the frontlines of this movement, is part of a larger pattern. First, I'll also say that when you're talking about professionalized environmental activism, meaning like the big greens - when there's a job and a paycheck involved - men tend to have those leadership positions. But when you're talking about grassroots activism, women tend to be at the front lines of these movements. You know, if they're married in a heterosexual relationship, their husbands are bringing home the paycheck and are working and the women are taking care of their children. They have the ability in the time to be involved in activism. But also many times they're the ones that are seeing their, their children suffer because of pollution. But another really interesting thing, though, is that the women have more freedom to protest kind of because of their lower social status in the gender hierarchy. So, for many men who, even men who don't work for the coal industry at all, there are social repercussions for speaking out against this industry that has really defined masculinity for a hundred years in the region. And, um, and, you know, many of these men, if they didn't work for the coal industry, their brothers or their dads or their granddads did. Um, and so there's the silencing effect that happens. It's, um, but the women, because they are doing this on behalf of their children

or grandchildren, in many ways, their activism, at least initially, seems depoliticized. And so they have more freedom to protest because their actions can kind of just be attributed to being good mothers or just taking care of their children. Whereas if the men step out and step up and, and try to speak out, they are seen as more of a threat. And so the social sanctions against them can be quicker, um, and, and sort of more intense.

SM I'm just so struck by how powerful and engaged and effective these women are when they roll up their sleeves and say "I'm mad, I'm going to fight this". And yet it feels like a losing battle in the end. Are you more optimistic?

SB I think that the future of Appalachia really depends on our ability to emphasize the diversity of Appalachia and to raise up those voices and alternative stories of the region that, that point to a future outside of coal because Appalachia can be more than coal and should be more than coal. Mary Hufford, who is a folklorist and Appalachian folklorist, talks about how, for instance, ginseng, like the, the region could also be defined it by wild ginseng. Um, that's been part of the cultural traditions and part of the economy of the region for longer than coal. Appalachia is one of the most biodiverse places on the planet and is home to 50 medicinal herbs that are on the market. And, you know, so it's there are other alternative futures for this beautiful. Wonderful place that need to be emphasized so that it's not just defined by this industry that has caused so much harm.

SM Shannon Bell is a professor of sociology at Virginia Tech and author of "Our Roots Run Deep As Ironweed: Appalachian Women in the Fight for Environmental Justice."

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SM Support for With Good Reason is provided by the University of Virginia Health System, pioneering treatments to save lives and preserve brain function for stroke patients. [UVAhealth.com](http://UVAhealth.com).

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