



The coal industry cannot continue without the banks

Brown (47) is a photographer, environmental activist and President of the *Keeper of the Mountains Foundation*. Brown and the Foundation will receive this year's Henry Mathews Award by the Association of Ethical Shareholders Germany.

k.a.: Paul, many members of your family used to work in the coal mines of West Virginia. Why did you become an environmentalist who fights against coal mining?



Brown: I was born and raised in a small coal camp known as Kilsyth in southern West Virginia. Every male member of my family before me was a coal miner. In fact, one of my grandfathers began working in the coal mines at the age of 10. I am the first male in my family not to mine coal. Growing up in West Virginia, mining coal seemed normal and the conditions surrounding us seemed normal.

After leaving the US to do human rights work, I realized that something, actually many things, were very wrong here. I began to see the environmental devastation and the dramatic health problems in my communities for the grave human rights violations they truly are.

k.a.: Over 500 Appalachian mountains have already been destroyed by mountaintop removal. What can a small organization like Keeper of the Mountains do to stop the mighty mining companies in the United States?

Brown: We can speak the truth. Keeper of the Mountains continues to share the truth of what is happening in mining communities. We are committed to sharing our stories, giving a voice to those who would otherwise be unheard, engaging a wider community in the understanding of how they can become involved and create change – one voice at a time. No raindrop believes it is responsible for the flood, and yet, together we are an incredible force.

k.a.: Why did you decide to come to Europe this year?

Brown: It is said, "knowledge is power". But actually knowledge doesn't become power

until it is put to use. We now have more than 23 peer reviewed scientific studies that prove we are suffering and dying as a result of our exposure to coal toxins and the toxins released from Mountaintop Removal (MTR) mining. If we want to get to the heart of a problem in this industry, the best way is to follow the money. The coal industry is heavily leveraged and cannot continue without the financial backing these banks provide. It is clear that neither the coal industry nor the politicians in our state or our federal government have any interest in helping us. But I have a great confidence that individual stockholders and the Board of Directors can hear our stories, see these scientific studies with the understanding that the numbers and facts within the studies are real Human Beings that are truly suffering, and understand that they can change this egregious situation by withdrawing the financing for this industry. Stockholders don't need an act of Congress: they can quite literally vote with their dollars.

k.a.: You participated in ten annual general meetings of banks and mining companies in Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy and the United Kingdom and protested against their involvement in mountaintop removal. What insight did you get?

Brown: First and foremost, I came to realize that coal truly is a global problem. We often perceive coal only as an environmental problem. As we work to stop coal, we find that it is also the source of incredible government corruption and gross Human Rights violations. On a positive note, I was very encouraged by the commitment to sustainable energy and best practices I witnessed in many European countries.

k.a.: In a few days you will talk to one of the banks you criticized: the Royal Bank of Scotland. What do you expect from this stakeholder dialogue?

Brown: It's difficult to project the outcomes of these meetings. I will say that the Sustainability Team at Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) seems to be genuinely concerned about their bank's involvement in this crisis. It is important to remember that the legality of a practice doesn't necessarily imply its

ethicality. For instance, there was a time when it was legal to buy, sell, and own slaves. History has taken a very dim view on that unconscionable practice. I believe history will likewise take a dim view on those practices which destroyed entire ecosystems along with the health, lives and the economies of my people. I believe RBS understands this and will be wise to remove their support for the coal industry, in particular that part which engages in Mountaintop Removal mining.

k.a.: Which goals do you have for the near future?

Brown: Before he passed away, Larry Gibson – the founder of Keeper of the Mountains, helped to preserve 50 acres on Kayford Mountain. It is now surrounded by several thousand acres of devastation from Mountaintop Removal. This small island of preserved land has been “ground zero” for the environmental battle in West Virginia. We are now in the process of bringing solar electricity to the family cabins on Kayford Mountain. Previous to this, they had no access to electricity. We hope to bring water collection and community gardens next year. As we transform these family cabins into a sustainable community, we are also transforming a battlefield into a victory garden. Additionally, we are working on a project called “Scarlet State” which aims to create more accountability within our state and local governments, particularly in regards to their gross negligence regarding the harms inflicted by the fossil fuel industry.

Interview: Markus Dufner, Association of Ethical Shareholders Germany, editor of *k.a. newsletter*

Published in *k.a. newsletter*, N° 9, September 2013, www.kritischeaktionaere.de/ka-newsletter.html

Please inform Association of Ethical Shareholders Germany if you wish to publish the interview or parts of it. Mail to: dachverband@kritischeaktionaere.de. Publication requires the following indication: “Interview by Association of Ethical Shareholders Germany”