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Interview

***DARE COOK, ASHLEY CRABTREE, AARON DAVIS,
KATIE GRAY, MICHAEL TROY, WITH PATRICIA
BEAVER***

“It’s Not a Job To Me”: Mike Mullins and the Hindman Settlement School

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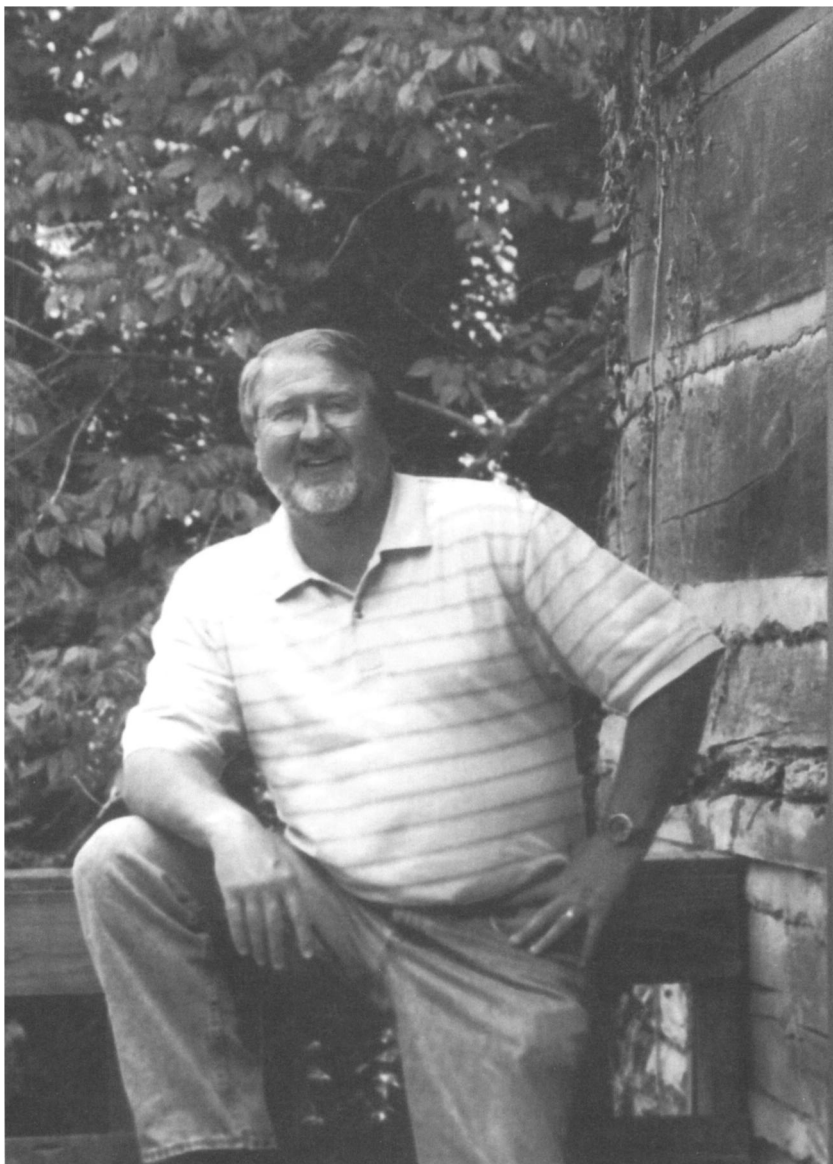
Michael Troy graduated from the University of Georgia in 2001 with a B.A. in geography. He completed his M.A. in geography at Appalachian State University in 2006.

Patricia Beaver, professor of anthropology and director of the Center for Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University, led these students to prepare for this interview in a graduate colloquium in Appalachian Studies during the fall semester of 2005.

INTRODUCTION

Mike Mullins, director of the Hindman Settlement School in Hindman, Kentucky, has dedicated more than 25 years to improving the lives of people in and around Knott County in Eastern Kentucky. His work in Hindman speaks volumes about his life and priorities.

Born and raised in Kentucky, Mullins had rarely left his native Floyd County, before enrolling in Berea College. Inspired by a sixth grade teacher, Mullins knew that he wanted to go to Berea and get a degree in American history. After graduating from McDowell High School, he did just that. He was the first one from his father’s side of the family to graduate from college. At Berea, Mullins’ first experience with Appalachian Studies was in a class taught by Loyal Jones, which proved to be a life-changing experience. For the first time, Mullins was introduced to the rich cultural heritage of the region where he grew up.



MIKE MULLINS, photograph by Judith Hensley

After graduating from Berea, he enrolled at the University of Cincinnati where he completed an M.A. in American history. During his final year at Berea, he met Frieda Smothers. They married while Mullins was in graduate school and have been together ever since, for more than 34 years.

Dedicated to improving the region where he grew up, Mike and Frieda Mullins returned to Eastern Kentucky. In October of 1972, he took a job at Alice Lloyd College as Campus Director of the Appalachian Oral History Project. Hired by Bill Weinberg, then Director of the Appalachian Learning Laboratory, Mike Mullins became the Lab Director three years later when Weinberg left. The Appalachian Studies program at Alice Lloyd was one of the best (and only) in the country at the time. Here Mullins became engaged in learning and developing Appalachian scholarship. Through numerous visits with the Appalachian Term, a learning program run by Alice Lloyd College for people wanting to experience Appalachia firsthand, Mullins became increasingly interested in the Hindman Settlement School.

In 1977, when the director's position opened at Hindman Settlement School, Mullins applied and got the job. He was 29 years old. That was almost 29 years ago. As director, Mullins has overseen numerous improvements to the school, instituted community learning programs, and bolstered the school's endowment significantly. He is constantly on the road trying to raise money for the school, so much so that he recently hired a person to assist in fund raising. Mullins wants prepare the way for new leadership to ensure that the school will thrive long after he is gone.

Still very much involved with the Settlement School, he foresees the day when he will retire. His future plans include spending quality time with his family, working with groups that are trying to save the mountains, continuing to be involved in the political arena, attending as many bluegrass music festivals as possible, and becoming more active in his church.

Dr. Patricia Beaver's Appalachian Studies Colloquium class interviewed him on October 26, 2005, at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. The interview topics ranged from his personal life and education to his work with the Hindman Settlement School. Everyone in the room was captivated by his charm, enthralled by his stories, and moved by his passion for family and work.

From Floyd County to Berea, Cincinnati, & "Appalachia"

KG: How did growing up in Kentucky influence you or prepare you for your professional career?

MM: I come from a large family on both sides: my mother is one of eight children, and my father's side had eleven.

On my father's side, my grandparents never went to school; both were totally illiterate. While looking into our genealogy, I found in the old court records a brown paper poke where a person had written a note saying that my grandmother and my grandfather could get married, and they both put their X.

On my mother's side, my grandfather was an orphan out of East Tennessee. He lived in a Masonic Lodge orphanage and ran away when he was 14 to come to Eastern Kentucky where he was a water boy on the railroads. He only had a fifth grade education. Later, he married my grandmother, who also only had a fourth or fifth grade education.

I really enjoyed school. For my first year I went to a one-room school at the mouth of Bryant Branch, near the end of the cornfield at my house.

Something happened very early in my life that had a tremendous impact on how I look at life. When I was in the third grade, I got hit with a car and spent a year in the hospital having major operations. Facing death and being told that you shouldn't be on this earth has a tremendous impact on your psyche. When I went back to school a year later, there was something in me that said, "you're not going to be a strong person. You're going to have to use your head to make a living."

Later on I went to a big school, a three-room school. I had wonderful teachers there, when I was in the fifth to eighth grades.

In the sixth grade, I had a teacher from Berea College who had married a lady from Floyd County. Her father was on the school board and got him a job teaching. He became my role model. His name was Mr. Gibbs. Later on he got a doctorate and taught at Western Kentucky University. But he was 23 years old when he came, taught, played with us, and became part of our community. He became my hero. Because of Mr. Gibbs, I decided in the sixth grade that I was going to go to Berea College to major in American history. After that, I was going to get a master's degree in American history.

I went on to high school and did pretty well. When I applied to go to college, I only applied to one place, Berea College. I didn't know where Berea College was. I knew it was somewhere south of Lexington, but I had never been there. I probably had only been to Lexington or Louisville one time in my life. The way the roads ran in Eastern Kentucky, we went north or south, to West Virginia or Tennessee. We didn't go west in Kentucky, because there were no roads.

At that time, 1967, it was five-and-a-half or six-hour drive from my house to Berea College. The guidance counselor told me to apply to several schools, but I couldn't imagine not getting accepted at Berea. I was a good student. I worked hard, and that's where I wanted to go. I wouldn't apply anywhere else; I put all of my apples in one basket. I got accepted.

When I went off to college, my grandfather said, "he won't last," because I was the only one on that side of the family that had ever been to college. I can remember spending three weeks before I came home the first time. It was like an eternity because I had never stayed away from home. But I spent four absolutely fantastic years at Berea College, and in spite of myself, I graduated with a pretty good average.

I continued my education each summer by going north and working in car factories on the assembly lines. If you ever think about quitting school, go get a job on an assembly line. I did that for three summers, and every week, I'd work night and day, get in the car at midnight on Friday, and drive eight hours home for the weekend, and then get back in time for work on Monday.

I'm a hillbilly, and we hillbillies like to go home as much as possible. I was one of those folks who drove the road back and forth during those summers.

After I finished at Berea College, I got assistantships to the University of Cincinnati and the University of Kentucky. I got accepted to Vanderbilt, but couldn't afford it. I did my master's degree in American history at the University of Cincinnati. I really wanted to look at history from the bottom up. I wanted to know about things like the Trail of Tears and the incarceration of the Japanese Americans in World War II. I wanted to know all the warts and everything that made up our history. And boy, I ended up with a bunch of the most radical historians you could ever come across, the New Left historians at the University of Cincinnati. It was so stimulating, and I can't tell you how exciting it was to be part of that group.

My M.A. is in the Colonial and American Revolutionary period, looking at the role of the common man in the American Revolution.

At the University of Cincinnati, I lived on the 9th floor of Sawyer Hall. One morning I read in the paper that someone from West Africa had jumped out of Sawyer Hall and committed suicide. When I read the article closely, I realized that this person was my next door neighbor, and I didn't know anything about him. I didn't want to be part of a community where my neighbor can kill himself and I don't even know about it. We don't need detectives in Eastern Kentucky. If someone gets shot, we know who shot him or her, what for, and most likely, if they deserved it or not. There are no drive-by shootings in Eastern Kentucky. Having that happen just said to me that I needed to go back to the hills.

I did a master's degree in 11 months and taught two sections of American history that met twice a week with 30 students in each section. I look back on it and remember a few times when I'd be talking to a class and I'd see this look of consternation. My students didn't understand what I was saying because I refused to change the way I talk for anybody, so I'd have to stop and translate. It was a great experience, a blur, but wonderful.

In the meantime, I got married in graduate school. My wife-to-be was at Berea College, and we'd been seeing each other for a year and a half or two, and she quit school. I sent her a bus ticket, and she came up on a Wednesday or Thursday. We decided to get married and went down and told her parents on a Friday. On Saturday, I called my mother and said, "I'm on my way to get married," and she dropped the phone and started crying. We got married in 1971 at Crouch's Creek Baptist Church in Jellico, Tennessee. A year ago we stopped there and took all kinds of pictures—our kids thought we were crazy. We'll be married 34 years on October 30th, and I give the good Lord credit we're still together. She's the most wonderful woman in the world.

So, that's a long way of answering your question, but the fact that I grew up where I grew up with my family led to my professional development. I grew up in the hills. That's my life. It's who I am. I have a great curiosity about what makes our area tick. I have this commitment to try and make the region a better place. I think that the Lord left me on this earth to give something back. That was a long way of saying that.

KG: Did you feel that you grew up in Appalachia, or did you discover the term later?

MM: I never knew I lived in Appalachia until I went to Berea College. I was Mike Mullins from High Hat, in Floyd County, in Eastern Kentucky, who lived in the coalfields. If you asked my father, "Are you Appalachian?" he would have no idea what you were talking about. He grew up at the head of Salisbury Branch in Knott County. Our place of reference was our immediate community.

While I was at Berea, I had one class in Appalachian Studies, and it was under Loyal Jones. In my senior year, I wandered into that class, and it changed my life. For the first time, I started thinking about who I was. I saw that Appalachia had a literature, music, and a culture. Prior to that, no one had ever really said to me that we had them. It was a turning point in my life.

This concept of Appalachia as a "peculiar" place came out of the early '60s and '70s rediscovery of this area. The mountains and the people of the mountains have been discovered over and over, mostly for exploitative reasons. I have a friend, Benny Bailey, who says that in the '60s and '70s, the typical Appalachian family was made up of a mother, a father, and a resident sociologist studying them. He had a theory about people coming in: he called it the "pop-off theory." He says, "They pop in, they pop off, and they pop out." There's been a lot of that. It's been a part of our history in the region.

There are two Appalachian regions. Wilma Dykeman writes about them in her book *Border States*. There is the area affected by tourism, and then there's the coal region. These are two very distinct regions of Appalachia, and they've had very different histories and very different challenges.

I come from the coal region. My father, who I consider the greatest man on the face of the earth, worked 30 years in the coal mines. He had a heart attack when he was 48 years old. They wouldn't let him go back into the mines because of the liability issues. He had another major heart attack when he was 52. Between ages 48 and 52, he was trying to get benefits, and he was denied over and over. The history of the coal industry is to work you to death, give you an occupational disease, and then not have anything else to do with you when you're of no use to them. My father finally got his black lung benefits, and he'll be 78 years of age in January [2006].

I grew up where each morning at the kitchen table my father would talk about mining coal. He was very proud of how much coal they'd mine and how many train cars they'd fill up. He loved mining coal, but I've been in the mines several times and hated every second of it. I had no desire to be in a mine with the mountain a mile above me. If you're ever in the mine and turn the light off, you feel the darkness. I used to take my Appalachian Studies classes into mines. I've had students to panic, and we've had to get them out of there. They couldn't stand it. I hated it too.

Loyal Jones, former Director of the Appalachian Center at Berea College, a member of my Board and one of my mentors, was the first person to introduce me to the concept of Appalachia.



Mike Mullins, kneeling, with his Alice Lloyd College Appalachian history class in October, 1975. He regularly took classes to visit this mine run by Southeast Coal Company at Redfox in Letcher County, Kentucky. One of his former students, Pam Brashear, shown at far left, recently sent this photograph to him.

From Alice Lloyd College to Hindman Settlement School

KG: What brought you to the Appalachian Oral History project at Alice Lloyd College? What sparked your interest in the Hindman Settlement School?

MM: I took advantage of opportunities. I applied for a job at Alice Lloyd College, never thinking I would get it. Bill Weinberg, who was my greatest teacher gave me a job. I came to Alice Lloyd in October of '72, and he told me, "Next semester you're teaching an Appalachian Studies class." I said, "I've never had but one Appalachian Studies class," and he said, "Nobody else has had many either. We've developed it, and you're going to teach it." So the next semester I started teaching Appalachian Studies. I had a group like you. We had a great time. I loved teaching.

I was also doing a lot of administrative work, raising money, and I was an environmental activist. I was secretary of the Floyd County Save Our Land Club, an anti-stripmining group that almost got me killed. I was collecting sludge out of streams for the Environmental Protection Agency in Atlanta and was making some enemies doing it, but I was having a great time being a pain in the butt.

It was an exciting time. Little Alice Lloyd College was the premiere Appalachian Studies program in the United States. We had something called the Appalachian Learning Laboratory. The Lab was made up of an oral history project, a summer theater, and a magazine. We had a program called the Appalachian Term where people would come from all over to visit and find out about hillbillies, and we'd charge them money for it. We had exchange students. We had a full curriculum: an Appalachian sociology class, an Appalachian literature class, and an Appalachian history class. I was right in the middle helping develop it.

We were traveling all over—to Highlander Center, down here to ASU. It just came together; it wasn't anything I planned. I was in the right place at the right time. Someone told me, "you've been really lucky." Well, you make your luck to a great extent. You work hard, put yourself in positions where you can make a difference, then dig in, and stay the course. That's the way I've been. I'm like a horse with blinders. I'm not the smartest person in the world, but I'll outwork anybody. That's been my history.

KG: What made you the right person for the director's job at Hindman?

MM: I was in charge of the Appalachian Term at Alice Lloyd College. We would plan from one day to two weeks of experiences out in the community. One of the places we visited was the Hindman Settlement School. Here was this little sleepy campus with nothing going on. I was 28, and I kept saying, "This place has some potential." I wondered what would happen if someone turned some energy loose and got involved in the place.

I'd been in academia for five years. Honestly, I got tired of all the meetings and the outsiders who always knew more about everything than any of us from the area. I wanted to be involved in the community on a level that I felt I wasn't being allowed to do at Alice Lloyd College.

There's a thin line between arrogance and confidence. I've got a lot of confidence, and some people say I've got a certain amount of arrogance. But I felt like I had something to offer. In January of 1977, I called up the chairman of the board at Hindman Settlement School, Ann Weatherford, Berea College President Weatherford's wife, and asked her for an appointment. I went by and said, "I know that you're the chairman of the board of the Hindman Settlement School, and if there's ever an opening for the directorship, I'd like to know. I might be interested in applying." Now that's pretty straightforward.

As the director of the Appalachian Learning Laboratory at Alice Lloyd, I had a wonderful job doing a lot of great things. But there were some major changes taking place at Alice Lloyd. The college had just hired a new president—I had helped hire him—and it turned out he had absolutely no interest in what we were doing in the Appalachian Learning Lab. He and I started disagreeing right off. He was strong willed and he was the president, and I was strong willed and I was under him. It was probably time to get out.

About four or five months later, I got a note from Mrs. Weatherford saying the director of the Settlement had submitted his resignation, effective December 1st. They were starting the process to hire another director. It was a hard decision because I was doing some exciting things, but I saw this as an

opportunity. Frieda has always supported me, and she said, "If that's what you want to do, go for it."

So I applied along with about 70 other people. It came down to me and a nephew of Jean Ritchie, the famous ballad singer. Her family had been involved in the Hindman Settlement School, and she was on the board. I interviewed in Lexington; they voted me in, seven to five. I knew who voted for me and who voted against me.

I gave notice at the college, moved to the Settlement campus in late October of '77, and officially took over on December 1st. On December 1st of this year [2005], I'll have completed 28 years. I had no idea what I was getting into, absolutely no idea.

I don't know what qualities made me a good choice for director. Maybe my other answers will tell you. I think an absolute dedication to being involved in the region is necessary. I wanted to be there, didn't want to be anywhere else. I have a high energy level. I have a willingness to stay the course. A lot of things came together. One was not knowing that I couldn't do it. I am 57 years old, and I've found out that there are a lot of things that will happen, and some you will have control over and some you won't. I learned how to go with the flow. I wanted to live and work in the hills, and I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to get involved in the community and do things that were positive.

When I left Alice Lloyd to be director of Hindman Settlement School, it was a lateral move. I didn't make any more money. I left Alice Lloyd College at \$14,000 a year with benefits. I never came to the Settlement School because of money. I had this feeling that it was where I needed to be. I truly feel that the good Lord brought me to the Forks of Troublesome Creek and the good Lord will determine when I leave. I've been offered other jobs, but my work at Hindman Settlement School is not done.

I'm as excited today about what I'm doing as I was 28 years ago. How many people can say that? I get up at 5 o'clock each morning, and I'm at work by 6:30. I work 10 to 12 hours a day normally, and I travel extensively. I'm not bragging—I'm just saying it's not work to me. If you gave me \$10 million tomorrow and said, "Mike, just go off into the sunset," I'd be at work at 6:30 the next morning.

I'd work for nothing if I could afford it. I'm involved in a great work, and when you can say that, you've made it. I've found my pot of gold, and it's not money. A lot of folks don't realize when they've found it, and they chase it. I have no desire to be anything else except director of the Settlement School.

I'll tell you a story. Years ago there was this man Fess Whittaker from Letcher County, Kentucky. Fess was running for jailer. He had fought in the Spanish American War with Teddy Roosevelt. When he was out on the stump campaigning for jailer, he said, "As Teddy and I were going up San Juan Hill, I looked over at Teddy, and I said to him, 'Teddy, you know after today you'll probably end up being president of the United States. But you know what? When I get back to Letcher County, Kentucky, all I want to be is jailer.'" All I want to be is director of the Hindman Settlement School.

Challenges and Opportunities at Hindman

DC: In 1977 when you arrived at Hindman, what did you see as your greatest challenges and opportunities, and what were your first steps to implement your ideas? What was your vision and how has it changed during your career at Hindman? How have you altered programs over time to sustain the organization?

MM: I was 29 years old when I was hired at Hindman. There was doubt among some very powerful board members that I was the man for the job, especially Miss Elizabeth Watts who had been a long time director. She came to Hindman in 1909 and stayed until 1956. She was very concerned about me because there had been some very tense periods between Alice Lloyd College, Miss Lloyd, and the ladies at the Forks of Troublesome Creek. Miss Watts was afraid that Alice Lloyd would co-op the Settlement through me.

When I came, I had to prove that I was there for Hindman Settlement School. I had to establish my own identity separate from Alice Lloyd College. That was a challenge.

Other challenges were the physical plant repairs needed on campus and determining future programs. The couple that had been there before me had been sort of caretakers. In December 1977, there were all these physical plant problems. It was a terrible winter that year. There were tee shirts saying, "I survived the winter of '77 and '78." It was the worst winter you could imagine. It started snowing in December, and there was snow on the campus until April. Water lines froze and burst. It looked like Yellowstone National Park with water shooting up out of the pipes. It was a major challenge to get a handle on the physical plant. I had no experience with that. I didn't know what I got myself into. Several buildings on campus had steam heat, and the water pipes had water breaks in January. I hired contract help to work on the pipes. I can remember working with those guys trying to keep the water and heat on at 5 in the evening when it was 10 degrees outside. The water was freezing in the ditches that we were working in.

We also had all these electrical lines on campus that weren't connected together. There was one pole that served five buildings. When there was a big wind, the lines would clap together and send an overload. I would have to turn the power off to keep the buildings from burning down. So I'd be up at 2 a.m. throwing the breaker on that one pole. The fire marshal was all over us. My first five years at the Settlement, when I was introduced as director, I would say, "No, I'm the assistant director. The state fire marshal runs the place."

While making these repairs and working on programming, I had some goals in mind. In five years, I wanted the people in the community to start saying, "Well, it looks like the Settlement's gonna be around for a little bit longer. Some good things are happening." My 10-year goal was for them to start saying, "The Settlement is back. It's really doing some important things." My 15-year goal was to hear, "We can't do without the Hindman Settlement School. It's back to where it used to be, doing great things for the community."

These goals were in my head. During this time, I had to deal with personnel, the physical plant, the board of directors, and the community. All of it was very challenging.

I also needed to find out what the role of the Settlement School needed to be in the community. I had things that I wanted to do, and I thought they were great ideas, but they weren't necessarily things that the community felt were important. It took me time to realize that the programming shouldn't come from me, but it should flow from the community to us. Then we need to respond the best we can. That seems pretty simple, doesn't it? But it's tough because you can't be all things for all people. Plus, before putting programming plans into action they must fit into the mission and purpose of the institution. Hindman's mission and purpose statement was written by James Still: "To provide educational and service opportunities for the people of the area, while keeping them mindful of their heritage."

The opportunities for meeting our mission have changed drastically over the years. We were the forerunner of the public school system. Over the years, one of the Settlement's major goals has been to work itself out of a job and let someone else take it over. As a matter of fact, we will encourage, even help facilitate the community taking over something that we are doing. We are never in any turf wars. If someone else wants to do it, fine. That's been my philosophy for running the place. The community suggested the programs that we have today. We're responding.

Another goal is to try to find the resources to keep the programs going. I never aspired to become a fund raiser, but it came with the job. If we wanted to do something, somebody had to pay for it. I am very fiscally conservative. I believe in paying as you go. I don't believe incurring debt. We either have the money to do something, or we don't do it.

DC: What role has your wife Frieda played in your work?

MM: I believe this is probably the most difficult question you're going to ask me today. I could not have done any of this without Frieda. That's all there is to it. Every step of the way, she's been there, and she's encouraged me.

It's hard to look back on 34 years of marriage and mention all the things that we've been through together. She was willing to leave where she came from and come to those hills. I always tell her she'll never be a real hillbilly because she can't get used to the hills—she gets sick driving the roads.

She's a brilliant lady. She's a wonderful mother. Our three children are doing great. She's supported me, and I pushed her to be everything she could be. She went back to school when she was in her 30s to get her degree and her teaching certificate. She went back with a vengeance. She's been a teacher, a vice-principal, a principal, and now she's in the central office of the Knott County School system.

I'm the most political person you'll meet, and I enjoy politics. Frieda is totally apolitical. She's also a stickler for going by the rules. I always say if she's in the Sahara desert and there's a stop sign, she'd stop. I'd run over top of it. But philosophically, our values are the same. We both believe in the same things, and that's so important in any kind of a long-term relationship. That's

not to say we've not had our times. Marriage is not made in heaven; it's made in the trenches. Day to day, buddy. But I could not have accomplished what I've accomplished without her saying, "Try for it, do it," and being my biggest supporter, my biggest booster, and my biggest defender.

If you want a fight, say something bad about me around her. There's this reporter in Eastern Kentucky who has been trying to figure out for years some way to write something bad about me. I heard he was out nosing around, and I called him. I said, "If you want to know any dirt about me, there's only one person who could tell you, and that's my wife. Go see her. If she'll tell you, then that's fine." He backed off. She'd have flogged him.

DC: David Whisnant implies that one reason you were able to better develop a new role for Hindman is that you are the first director from the area. How would you respond to that statement?

MM: First of all, he's wrong. I wasn't the first one. The director before me, Lionel Duff, grew up in Knott County. His family's been in this area since the early 1800s.

But that's really not the key point. David came to the Settlement when I had been there about four or five years. Things were changing, and you could see some progress at Hindman. I think he missed the boat a lot in his book *All That Is Native and Fine*. He's a great scholar. He's a man that I admire. But I think that he had already decided what he wanted to prove in his book before he came to Hindman. He came and found exactly the things in the archives that proved what he wanted to prove and discarded stuff that disproved him. I say this because when he interviewed Al Stewart, Al told him, "Everybody wasn't playing the dulcimer. They were also playing the banjo and fiddle." But that didn't fit into what David wanted to write. David claimed that these ladies [Stone and Pettit] tried to determine what was "native and fine," but I think that they simply responded to things that appealed to them. Miss Pettit was interested in the old ballads. There wasn't anything wrong with that. She had an interest and wanted to collect them. Plus, David concentrated on Miss Pettit in his book, but she was only at Hindman from 1902 until 1912. She left in 1912 to help start the Pine Mountain Settlement School. She did most of the things David talks about at Pine Mountain, not at Hindman.

I really believe that these ladies didn't have any malice. They were cultural interventionists. There's no doubt about that. But they were asked to come and start the school. They didn't force themselves on the people. They tried to leave at various times. The facilities burned down in 1905 and 1909. They wanted to leave. But the people came together and built other buildings and gave them land. The community wanted them to stay. So who is to judge them when the people wanted them there to provide what they were providing? They were not social activists, which is what David wanted them to be. They dealt with the situation at hand. You can always read history backwards with a vengeance and determine how you think they should have acted. I'm not going to get into judging them. I think they were honest, hard working, considerate, compassionate people who wanted to provide a service, and this is the way they did it.

Did they make some mistakes? Of course, they made mistakes. We all make mistakes. I think their hearts were in the right place, and that's the key to me.

All That's Native and Fine is an interesting concept. I think cultural intervention is a fact of life in all cultures. These women might not have been involved in issues related to the mining and the union movement, but they did other things. They educated children and provided the first social services, doctors and nurses. When they came to Hindman, there was a major problem with trachoma that caused blindness. In 1915, they brought Dr. Joseph Stuckey to campus. The Stuckey building on campus is named after him. For the next 15 to 20 years, he worked out in the surrounding communities from a little hospital located at the Settlement. In 1930 they held a big reunion on campus to celebrate obliterating this dreaded disease that caused all these people to go blind. The Settlement also sent a lot of folks to Louisville on trains for health care that they couldn't get in Eastern Kentucky.

The founders probably did some things that I totally would have disagreed with, and they made some comments in their journals that I wish they hadn't made, but the good that they did far outweighs the bad.

DC: We read in Stoddart's book *Challenges and Change* that you took time to meet Elizabeth Watts after you became director of Hindman. What is the most valuable thing she taught you?

MM: Miss Watts became one of my mentors. She had lived on campus from 1909 to 1956, almost the entire history of the school. You'd be an idiot not to take advantage of that kind of experience. I like to think I was like a son to her. She was active on the board until her death. She came to board meetings until she was 97. She was living in Knoxville, Tennessee, in a retirement home, when she died just a few months shy of her 102nd birthday. She was truly the heart and soul of Hindman Settlement School.

May Stone and Katherine Pettit were the founders. Miss May Stone was part of the Settlement School's history from 1902 until she died in 1948. But Miss Stone did not live full time on campus. She was out raising money and doing other things to promote the Settlement.

Miss Watts was a housemother, teacher, assistant director, and director of the Settlement. As assistant director, she was really the director since she lived the entire academic year on campus with the student body. She had more impact on more students than anyone in the history of the Hindman Settlement School. She was a very regal lady. She had the presence of a Cratis Williams, or a James Still. She was totally selfless. She gave her entire life to Hindman. The students who got to know her absolutely worshipped her.

When I was hired, she voted against me. She didn't want me to be the director. I was determined to prove myself to her and to the rest of the board. As the years went by, when we'd have board meetings, I'd send someone to get her. I'd usually take her back myself so that we could visit. I visited her every month or two until her death. I wanted to take full advantage of her advice and wisdom. We became very, very close. When she could no longer come to the board meetings, I would drive to Knoxville, and we would have the real board meeting between us. She was such a force.

She was from Bristol, Rhode Island, and she was supposed to be buried there. I couldn't understand why this lady who had given her entire life to the Hindman Settlement School wanted to be buried in Rhode Island. So I went to her and said, "Miss Watts, where do you consider your home to be?" And she said, "Of course, Hindman, Kentucky, Hindman Settlement School." I said, "Well, one of these days you're not going to be with us, and I would like to bring you back home to the campus." Tears came to her eyes, and she said, "Are you sure?" I said, "Where would you rather be, in Bristol, Rhode Island, where they know nothing about you, or at the Forks of Troublesome Creek where you've made such an impact?" She said, "I'd love to be at the Forks of Troublesome Creek, but I'll have to talk to my family." She did, and they readily agreed that she should be laid to rest at the Settlement.

When we celebrated Miss Watts' 100th birthday, she had gotten to the point where she could no longer get to the dining hall where she was living. Shortly before her big birthday bash, I asked her if she would consider using one of those electric motor carts. She said, "No, they're too costly, and I'd never use it." I pleaded, "Miss Watts, would you just humor me? I'll get it on consignment, and we'll see if it works out." It took her a little while to get used to it, but she loved it. It made such a difference in her life. I'll never forget this scene. She had two sisters who were in their 90s. One came to her 100th birthday from California with several nieces and nephews. We all went to dinner with Miss Watts the night before the party at the retirement home. She led the way to the dining hall in her little motor cart, and right behind her in single file were 10-12 family members and friends—we were all her little ducklings. I'll never forget it.

All Miss Watts ever wanted to do was give. She paid me the greatest compliment that I've ever had as the director of the Hindman Settlement School. She told me one time, "Your administration reminds me of those times when the Hindman Settlement School was at its best." That comes from the person who knew it better than anyone else. I loved her. She taught me more than you can imagine. I brought her back to the Forks of Troublesome Creek when she passed away, and she is buried on campus. Mr. Still is buried about 10 or 15 feet from her. She's still with us in spirit. We had her funeral on campus, and more than 300 people attended. She represented the best of the best, and she left an imprint on my life.

DC: Where were Hindman's students from when you began, and how did you relate to them? How has the student population changed during your time as director?

MM: When I first came to Hindman, only a half dozen students were boarding on campus, and they were there because they were from parts of the county where public school buses couldn't travel.

Here's a brief history of education at Hindman Settlement School. In 1932, Hindman High School was built adjacent to the campus, and the Settlement provided most of the teachers. The students lived on campus and went to the Hindman High School, which was just across the creek from the

Settlement. There were large sections of Knott County where students could not get to public schools because the roads were impassable for school buses.

After taking over as director, the board said to me, "We would like for you to see if the boarding program is still needed." So I went out to the isolated sections of the county and talked with families about boarding their children on campus. During my second year, we started out the school year with about 20 students. By the end of the year, I had about 10 of them left. A lot of these students were children who were having problems at home. Their parents wanted somebody else to take them off their hands. These students didn't want to go to school, do the required work on campus, or go by the rules and regulations. A decision had to be made. Were we going to continue to be a boarding program or use our resources to meet other needs? I told my board, "I honestly don't have any desire to be the director of an institution taking care of children that parents just want to get rid of." I said, "That's not my strength. That's not what I'm interested in doing with my life." I recommended that we discontinue the boarding program in 1980. I explained, "I don't think there's a need for it. I think every child in this county can get to public schools." And the board went along with me. I know that sounds pretty brazen, but I just didn't see a need for it.

Hindman Settlement School has not been a K-12 school for over 50 years. When Hindman High School was built, the grade school on campus closed in the 1950s. The Settlement's programming from the 1950s until 1980 consisted of the boarding program and the providing of teachers in music, art, and industrial arts. In the 1980s the main program provided art and music teachers for the public schools. In the 1990s the focus shifted to the learning difference/dyslexia and adult education programs, along with the continuation of Family Folk Week and the Writers Workshop. We also serve as a community center. Today, we reach about 5000 people a year through our programs and community activities. Our student body includes participants in the programs I just mentioned and attendees of all the meetings that take place on campus, students we reach through the 4-H program, and those we reach through sending visiting artists into the public schools, patrons of the library, and those artists who have crafts on consignment in our craft shop.

The Hindman Settlement School is also a gathering place for some pretty controversial activities. For example, there's a movement among several writers from Kentucky to expose the disastrous results of mountaintop coal removal. The place they've been meeting to discuss this issue is the Hindman Settlement School. Students are not just sitting in institutions; they are out in the communities learning how to organize so that they can make their communities better places to live. The KFTC—the Kentuckians for the Commonwealth—and various other community groups that are trying to do some good things in the mountains know they have a place at Hindman. But we also host other groups such as Consolidated Coal who have had several meetings on campus with their workers to go over their work benefits packages. We will providing housing soon for a group that is part of a major gathering at Appalshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky.

Mission Schools vs. Settlement Schools

AD: What has enabled the Hindman Settlement School to persevere while so many other settlement schools have come and gone during its time?

MM: I think the main reason is that there is a difference between mission schools and settlement schools. Mission schools were set up by religious institutions not only to provide educational opportunities but but also to make good Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, etc. Proselytizing was a major part of their mission. Boards outside the region also controlled mission schools. These boards determined the goals, the mission, and provided the support for these schools. But when they decided that these schools were no longer a priority for support, they pulled out. This left a vacuum of both leadership and support because none had been developed on the local level. Therefore, no group was prepared to take over on the local level, and these institutions closed their doors.

The concept of the settlement schools comes out of a movement that began in the slums of London, England, in the 1800s. Mission-minded individuals wanted to make life better for the poor, so they moved into the slums and opened settlement houses to provide assistance to them. Out of this movement the settlement houses in New York City and Chicago were born. Jane Adams' Hull House in Chicago and Henry Street Settlement in New York City are two of the most famous settlement houses.

Miss May Stone and Miss Katherine Pettit visited Jane Adams in Chicago and the settlement houses in New York City. They took the urban settlement concept and applied it in a rural area. This is another matter that David Whisnant and I disagree about. I say the Hindman Settlement School is the first rural social settlement school in the United States, but David says it's someplace else. But if you look at the institution that David mentions in his book compared to the Hindman Settlement School, there's no comparison.

The Settlement School developed, from the very beginning, close ties with the community, because the founders were *asked* to start the school. It was not foisted off on the community by a religious group. In 1899 Uncle Solomon Everidge walked from the Forks of Troublesome Creek to Hazard to observe Miss Stone and Miss Pettit working in a summer camp. He asked them to come to the Forks of Troublesome. They went to another part of Knott County in 1900 and then to Hindman in 1901. When they got through that summer, the local people said, "Would you stay and start a school?" Neither one of the founders came up with the idea of starting a school. But they saw a need and people willing to provide support for a school, so they agreed. It began as the Women's Christian Temperance Union School. In 1915, it changed its name to the Hindman Settlement School. The Settlement did not proselytize like a mission school, but it was founded on Christian principles. Miss Watts told me that there were three areas that the Settlement did not get involved in: politics, religion, and, at that time, moonshining. I've really broken the politics rule!

The Settlement provided many of the early social services for this area. For example, Al Stewart came to the Hindman Settlement School when he was five

years old. He and other students who didn't have a home grew up on campus. It was the forerunner of an orphanage. It provided the first doctors, nurses, and health department.

I think the main reason the Settlement School is still here today is that the leadership—both on the campus level and the board level—has been able to change to meet changing needs. A lot of other institutions could not make the necessary changes to keep their doors open. They didn't have the local leadership or board support to continue, and as times got hard, it was easier to close rather than persevere.

But when you have strong personalities like Miss Watts and others, they weren't going to give up. There were times in the '30s when the school was totally broke. They got credit from a little store downtown and lived on this and what they grew on campus. These were tough, tough times. After I read the history of the Settlement, I realized how easy I've had it compared to Miss Watts. I've not had disastrous floods, typhoid epidemics, and the inability to pay the bills on time. They persevered.

I would not want you to leave today with the idea that Mike Mullins runs the Settlement by himself. I have the most dedicated staff you could ever find, who work for a pittance of what they're worth. We don't have any personal contracts at the Hindman Settlement School. I've never had a contract during the 28 years that I've been director. But I have people who've given 20 or 30 years of their lives to this institution because they believe in what we're doing. We're part of a great work. When you're part of a great work, hopefully, you're going to realize it. For example, Jim Phelps has been part of the Settlement family for 34 years. He is the most giving person on the face of the earth. He's given his whole life to this area as a 4-H agent. My associate executive director, Rebecca Ware, will complete her 30th year on staff this fall. She knows more about the campus than anyone, including me. The Settlement has also been blessed with a wonderful board of directors.

The Settlement's only had five directors in more than 100 years. I'm never going to beat Miss Stone or Miss Watts' record, but I'm going to be number three. I'll never be as good a director as they were, but I'll accept being number three.

The Settlement has been able to change to meet changing needs and not live in the past. The minute you start getting comfortable with what you're doing, you're in trouble. You've got to be willing to be open to other ideas and programs. What we were doing 28 years ago and what we're doing today are totally different. What we will be doing 28 years from now should probably be totally different. My goal is to leave enough money and enough support for Hindman Settlement School to continue.

AD: Right now, the two main programs at Hindman are the dyslexia program and the adult education program. As these specialized learning programs become increasingly state and federally funded, what do you see as Hindman's role in the future? Do these programs compete with or complement other available programs?

MM: First of all, the feds and the state are not going to do anything to help the children that have what we call “learning differences” and dyslexia. There’s never going to be the necessary funding in the public schools. So that’s a moot point. That’s not going to happen in my lifetime, my grandchildren’s, or my great-grandchildren’s lifetimes. These students are going to continue to fall through the cracks. They’re not going to get the kind of support and help that they deserve unless other private groups like the Settlement get involved. It’s just not going to happen.

Our adult education program began when I got a call from a lady wanting to learn how to read her Bible. I got a staff member’s wife to tutor her. Somehow the word spread that we were doing this, and several other people called wanting help. We had been getting workers through the Mennonite Central Committee for a number of years for our art and music program, so I asked them about getting some adult education volunteers. They have provided staff for this program for over 20 years. They give at least two years of service, and they mostly work out in the homes doing one-on-one tutoring. We got involved in adult education, not because we set out to do it, but because we responded to a need. Later on, we combined our program with the local program that’s funded by the state to set up the Knott County Adult Learning Center. Ten years ago, in the state of Kentucky, the literacy programs and adult ed programs in the same county often didn’t speak to each other. When we pulled our adult education program and the state adult ed and literacy programs together under one roof with one director, that was revolutionary. Two years later, Kentucky mandated that every county combine their adult education activities. We’d already done it. The concept of leveraging resources is not new to us.

The Kentucky Valley Educational Co-Op pays the director of the Knott County Adult Learning Center. We consider her and her workers auxiliary staff members. We don’t pay them but we consider them part of the Hindman Settlement School staff, and they consider themselves part of the Settlement School. They are now located in a beautiful facility that was made possible by the Settlement.

I would love it if the state would come in tomorrow and take over all of our adult education work and all of our work with dyslexia. It would tickle me to death because there would be other needs that we could address. And what are those needs? I don’t really know, but they should flow from the community. I’m not going to sit around in my ivory tower and try to determine the needs. Some possible ideas include a program dealing with the tremendous drug problems that we have in these hills; professional development for public school teachers to teach them the methodologies we use to help children with learning differences/dyslexia. I think what we can do in the future is limitless, but we’ve got to be willing to respond. I’ve never had any grand plan, because I’ll screw it up [laughs]. I’ll let it come to us. The Settlement School has persevered because we have always made a concerted effort to be part of our community. We’ve not set ourselves apart.

The one major thing that could potentially have the greatest impact on the changing nature and structure of the Settlement School is the Knott County Community Development Initiative (CDI). On the Hindman Settlement School campus now, in our new 32,000-square-foot facility—the Knott County Opportunity Center—there is a new library, a branch of Hazard Community College, the Adult Learning Center, a daycare center, a distance learning center from Morehead State University, county offices, and other things. I can do teleconferencing with someone in Siberia from our campus.

Across the creek, we have the new Kentucky School of Crafts, which is part of the higher education system. It has classes going in wood and jewelry. We're going to add ceramics next, and monies have been recommended in the state's higher education plan to add blacksmithing and textiles during the next four years. We're already housing students for workshops, and we may even end up building additional housing.

Another part of the CDI is the Kentucky Appalachian Artisan Center in downtown Hindman. I'm on the board of the Knott County Arts and Craft Foundation (KCACF), which is in charge of this Center. The KCACF is also getting ready to renovate two or three buildings downtown into business incubator spaces for artisans.

What we're doing is taking little downtown Hindman, the Hindman Settlement School, and the old high school and creating a continuous campus. Funding for the CDI was received after a competitive proposal process. Once designated as a CDI community, we put together a Master Plan that has resulted in over \$20 million in funded projects. The CDI has the potential to have the most significant impact on the Hindman Settlement School than anything else I have done during my directorship. I want the Settlement to continue being a positive part of the community, and if it totally changes, then that is what should happen.

The Settlement School has been part of all of this [the Community Development Initiative] from the very beginning. All of the meetings that led to the writing of the proposal were held on our campus. I'm the Chairman of the CDI Steering Committee, and I helped write the proposal. We knew we'd never be able to attract any kind of industry, so we chose to build on our cultural heritage. Our proposal was entitled, "Using Our Heritage To Build Tomorrow's Community." Some folks said, "The Hindman CDI was chosen because several of us were in tight with the Governor." That is absolutely correct, but we also had the best proposal and leadership to accomplish what we proposed. Glory hallelujah! We were smart enough to access these funds, and we aren't going to apologize for trying to improve the quality of life in our community. We'd rather fall flat on our face than not try.

Vaughn Grisham wrote a book [*Tupelo: The Evolution of Community*, 1999] on community development in Tupelo, Mississippi, which at one time was considered one of the most impoverished cities in the United States. Over a 40- or 50-year period, it has become one of the most dynamic communities in the United States. Vaughn has been an evaluator for our CDI project, and we're now one of his study projects. He has said on more than one occasion that we

are a model for economic development in small rural communities. In North Carolina, you've this wonderful lady, Becky Anderson, who runs Handmade in America. She's been to Hindman numerous times and has served as one of our consultants. What I'm saying is we've gotten the best of the best across the United States to help us in this process. We've won a national award for development planning that was presented at a national conference in Seattle, Washington.

So some exciting things are happening at the Forks of Troublesome Creek.

Hindman Settlement School's Literary Traditions

AD: You are highly regarded by writers who have attended the Appalachian Writers Workshop. What is your role in shaping Appalachian literature through the Writers Workshop?

MM: [Laughs] As far as being "highly regarded," I don't know. I'm liked by a few of them, I guess. Al Stewart started this little workshop and a folk week in 1977. I didn't arrive on campus until the fall of '77. It cost \$25 tuition, \$25 for room and board. Al was also the director the following year, but I got involved and helped do the mailings. We had 25 or 30 people show up. Al retired from helping with the Writers Workshop after a couple of years, and I took over.

Harriette Arnow was on staff for the first workshop. She was a very intimidating woman to me. She probably didn't weigh 100 pounds and was maybe 4'8". I'm still amazed that these unbelievably talented people would come and do what they did at the Forks of Troublesome Creek at the Writers Workshop for what I pay them and how hard I work them. It makes you wonder why they did it. But we started nurturing these folks and giving them a place to gather when nobody else was doing it. Of course, we didn't know we were doing it. But out of this process, a core group of writers developed a loyalty to the workshop and they encouraged others to become involved. I will mention only a few of these writers: the late Jim Wayne Miller, Gurney Norman, Wilma Dykeman, George Ella Lyon, Robert Morgan, Sharyn McCrumb, Lee Smith, Hal Crowther, Silas House, Barbara Smith, Jack Higgs, and many others. They are willing to be part of this week, and they don't come for money. Most of them get paid more for doing a reading than what they get paid for working the entire week of the workshop. But we've developed a sense of community with a nurturing atmosphere that really appeals to the writers and participants. Writing is a very lonely activity, and most of the participants don't attend to learn how to write. They come to recharge their creative spirit and to become part of an extended family that they can call on for support. Several informal writing groups have grown out of the workshop. Of course, they also come to pick up some writing tips here and there, but for the most part it is a spiritual gathering. Honestly, I have a difficult time describing what happens during this week. I work very hard to get the right staff for the week, but there are so many intangible things that make this gathering so successful. For instance, the beautiful campus and how we house

everyone makes everyone come together. You live together, you work together, you eat together, and you party together! You can't hide out. It forces you to be part of the community, and most people would just as soon not do that, but once they start experiencing the week, they enjoy it.

It's also a very egalitarian gathering. When you have someone like Cratis Williams washing dishes, people would line up to help because he'd be telling stories and singing. James Still would occasionally even help with the dishes, just to show that he could do it. Over the years, the workshop has developed a very good reputation, and it is attracting more and more writers, especially from the region. It's not my workshop; it's not the Hindman Settlement School's workshop; it's the *writers* workshop. I want them to take ownership of it. Lee Smith told me it's the best workshop in the United States, bar none. She says, "I've been part of a lot of writers workshops. But what you create at Hindman is the most unique experience that I've had as a workshop staff member." Lee and her husband, Hal Crowther, have made a commitment to serve on staff every other year.

The Hindman Settlement School has a strong literary tradition. In the early years, Ann Cobb published a book of folk poetry, *Kinfolks*, which was republished with additional poems from our archives as part of the Settlement's 100th anniversary celebration. One of the most famous local color writers of the early 20th century, Lucy Furman, wrote several books about her experiences at the Settlement. She was a housemother for the little boys and was like a mother to Al Stewart. Of course, James Still, is by far the most noted literary figure to be associated with Hindman. He arrived in 1931 and was affiliated with the Settlement until his death in 2000. Al Stewart, an accomplished poet, was the founder of one of the first literary magazines relating to the region, *Appalachian Heritage*. The Settlement has had a long literary history, and we have built on it. I like to think that the spirits of those literary figures who have passed on are still walking around on campus.

Mrs. Arnow was part of the first eight or nine workshops. The last time I invited her to be on staff, I knew that she was having some health problems, but she insisted that she could make it. Her daughter called me and asked, "Would you please tell Mom that she should not attend the workshop because of her health?" I said, "I'm not telling her she can't come. That is up to you." Her family tried to get her to cancel out, but she was determined to be here. She came when she was sick, and we found her passed out in her apartment. That kind of commitment is just phenomenal to me.

It's an extraordinary gathering, and the spirit there is almost impossible to describe. My role is to make sure everything is going well. In many ways, this workshop is one of our most important activities, because it has a regional and national reputation.

AD: How do you select staff for the workshop? And how do you select the participants?

MM: Most of the staff is identified through the evaluation process. They're recommended by participants or by other staff members. Just this week, I've contacted a poet from East Tennessee State University, Don Johnson.

Jack Higgs and some other folks have recommended him. I try to have a combination of experienced staff and new talent. I've not locked myself in to having the same folks back year after year. I'm constantly looking for new writers. Some of these new writers have gotten their start at our workshop, like Silas House—a 26-year-old mail carrier from Lily, Kentucky—who was so nervous about attending his first workshop at Hindman that he drove by the entrance two or three times before he could get enough courage to register. About midweek of the workshop, Lee Smith came to me and said, "There's this phenomenal young writer on campus." She took Silas under her wing, introduced him to her publisher, and now he has published three novels and has another one on the way. Silas is an amazing talent. You should go to his website and see what he's doing. He's now writer-in-residence at Lincoln Memorial University and is teaching in a master's program in Louisville. Silas will tell you that it all started at the Hindman Settlement School's Writers Workshop. He dedicated one of his books [*The Coal Tattoo*] to Lee Smith and the Hindman Settlement School.

So I look for staff that are from the region or have their roots in the region. They must have published nationally and be compatible with the workshop. If their ego is the most important thing to them, then they won't fit in at Hindman. All you need to see is how Lee Smith and Silas House share with their students to understand what I'm saying.

I already know who I'm asking to be on the staff for the next two years. I'm usually about two or three years ahead in my planning for staff. If there is someone I want to be on staff and I don't know them, then I get somebody who does to speak to them. They might say, "Mike might be contacting you about the writers workshop, and I hope you can do it. This is something you should do."



Mike Mullins in his office, photo by Judith Hensley

Honestly, I have some staff members upset with me because I have not invited them back sooner. If I haven't invited them back, it doesn't mean they didn't do a good job. It just means I have some other writers that I want to be on staff. But I won't extend invitations to staff who come unprepared and try to wing it in their sessions. This won't work with the kind of sophisticated participants we attract today. Writers let us know on the evaluations if someone is not prepared. These are sharp people who are going to challenge the staff, and that's good.

The participants come from all over the United States. In the early years, it was first come, first serve. Nothing against Elderhostel, but honestly, it was becoming an Elderhostel program. But several years ago, we changed the process so that you have to submit a manuscript to get admitted. That changed the whole thing. The quality of the writers applying skyrocketed. The numbers increased. There's still a deadline, but applicants are no longer assured of admission based on when they register. We also limit the number of pages they can submit, and if there are too many applicants in a certain area—the novel, short story, poetry, nonfiction, writing for children—the manuscripts are ranked by outside readers, and this ranking determines who gets accepted. I'm the only person who knows who the readers are, and I send them the manuscripts with numbers on them, not names. So the competition is tougher now. I actually have let the workshop get a little bigger than it should be. I was accepting 85 or 90, but I'm scaling it back to 75 to 80 because I think bigger is not always better.

AC: How does the Writers Workshop support the work of the Settlement School?

MM: The major thing it does is to give us credibility. On a regional level, the Settlement is probably known more for the writers workshop than anything it does. The workshop gives us visibility that you can't buy. We make a few dollars, but not much. You can spend the entire week, have room and board, tuition, and all these activities for \$600. We're talking about an unbelievable staff, three meals a day, nice meeting facilities, and comfortable housing. Our expenses for the week have increased, and therefore, the cost has increased. I think the Hindman Settlement School and the Appalachian Writers Workshop have become synonymous with quality, and that has given us a good name. I hear it all the time.

AC: Robert Morgan mentions in his preface to *Crossing Troublesome...* that you kept writers such as Harriette Arnow, Gurney Norman, and Jim Wayne Miller coming back to the workshop year after year. Was it difficult to persuade them and why?

MM: It was not difficult to persuade these writers to be part of the workshop. They bought into the concept that this was an important gathering for the community of writers in the region. These are good, compassionate, unselfish people who wanted to share.

Gurney Norman has probably nurtured more writers than anybody. He has spent more time nurturing than writing, and that's a gift that the good Lord has given him, along with the fact that he is an excellent writer. He has encouraged so many people in so many ways.

As I've said, Mrs. Arnow was an intimidating lady. I never could get her to call me anything but Mr. Mullins. I tried to get her to call me Mike, and she would say, "Okay, Mr. Mullins." Over the years I have learned a lot about how to run the workshop. I don't know why the staff put up with me and did the things I asked them to do in those early years. They would show up on campus, and I would hand them a big stack of manuscripts. They'd have to hide out to read them before doing their conferences with the students. They now get the manuscripts a month in advance, and the number of pages is limited. In the early years of the workshop, we never limited the length. I would give Mrs. Arnow 10 or 15 thick novel manuscripts, and she would take them to her room and stay up most of the night reading them. She slept very little the entire week. Several of the participants told me that when they had a conference with Mrs. Arnow, they were just terrified. She would destroy a manuscript. It would have so much red ink on it that it looked like it was bleeding. But the person whose manuscript had been critiqued would come away very happy. Many of them wrote on their evaluations that one conference with Mrs. Arnow was worth the entire workshop. Some people will say that now about their conferences with staff members.

As you go up in your profession, you shouldn't forget who helped you. The staff members of the writers workshop haven't forgotten. They remember when they were struggling, and they want to give back. We recently named Gurney Norman our senior writer-in-residence for the Hindman Settlement School. It really pleased him. He continues to be a very valuable part of this gathering.

AC: You have mentioned James Still and Albert Stewart. What were your relationships with them?

MM: I got to know Mr. Still first at Alice Lloyd College. I knew him for 30-some years. When I came to the Settlement, Mr. Still had been told that I would probably ask him to leave the campus. He told me later that he had been looking for another place to live in the Whitesburg area. But when I moved to the campus, my house was next door to Mr. Still's, and my family and I immediately



Photo by Judith Hensley

developed a close relationship with him. He loved my children, and he was like a grandfather to them. I would like to say that I was his favorite, but I had to take second place to the children and my wife. He and Frieda had a very wonderful relationship. She was always taking him food, especially chicken and dumplings.

I think he is the greatest writer that has ever written about the Appalachian region. He didn't consider himself an Appalachian writer, but a writer who wrote about Appalachia. He is probably the most brilliant person that I have ever known. He was an absolute genius.

But he was shy in certain ways. He was not a self-promoter. He was very sensitive, and I feel that this caused him not to be as prolific as some writers. He had a hard time taking rejection. He wanted things to be so perfect that he would work and work to make sure that anything he submitted was perfect. As a result, he was seldom satisfied with his writings. He wrote 14 or 15 books, and he lived to be 95. People asked him, "Why did you become a writer?" and he said, "I had no choice. I had to put these things down. I had to express it, you know. I had to get it out of me so that I could go on with life." When I came to Hindman, he was 70 years old, and he had pretty much had not been in the public eye for over 30 years. He was not well known, and he was not getting any attention. Financially, living on campus was extremely important to him. He was not a wealthy man. He had some basic retirement, interest from investments, and royalties coming in, but having a home and most of his meals provided by the Settlement were very helpful.

He would get invitations to come and read at various places, and he'd turn them down. People thought he was a hermit, or a person who didn't want to share, which was not the truth. University of Kentucky or Berea College or somebody would call him up and want him to read and offer a fee of \$100 or \$200, and he would say "no" and not tell them the reason. The reason was that he could not afford to travel, spend the night, and buy his meals for what they were offering. He would never negotiate what he was worth. But shortly after I came to campus, I became his intermediary. He would say somebody wants me to come and do this thing, and I'd say, "how much are they going to pay you?" and he'd say "I don't know." I said, "Give me the number. Let me talk to them." I'd call up and negotiate. "If you want him, this is what you have to do." I became his unofficial agent and publicist. He got to the point where he would say, "Check with Mike Mullins," or "Call Mike—he knows how I do things." He started getting out more. At the same time, there was a resurgence of interest in Appalachian literature. A lot of things came together.

One of my saddest days was when I moved off campus and we were no longer next-door neighbors. That was the hardest part about moving off campus. I built a house because I needed a bigger place for my family, but for years and years, he was a regular at our table, and he never missed having Thanksgiving with us. He went on staff outings and we traveled together to a variety of events. He was part of the Settlement family.

I threw him some big parties. On his 80th, over 300 people came. It just blew his mind. The Monday after this event, I came into my office, and a first

edition of his first book of poetry, *Hounds on the Mountain*, published in 1936, was on my desk. There was a little note that said, "One of these days I'll write something in it." That book lay on my desk for almost two years. One day I came in, and he had written something very, very special in it.

He was like an elephant. He never forgot or seldom forgave anybody for anything they did against him. He and I had some pretty good disagreements over that. He wanted me to take his side, and many times I refused to get involved or agree with him. I make enough enemies on my own. At times he got rather irritated with me, but he always knew that I would be there. Over the years he confided in me everything about his wishes for the day that he passed away—where he wanted to be buried, what to put on his stone, the type of stone he wanted, and the type of service. He also told his adopted daughter the same thing. And when he died, we did exactly what he told us to do.

I've gotten so much from working at the Settlement School, but the most awesome thing was getting to know Mr. Still. Becoming his friend and being in the presence of greatness daily was something that I never took for granted. I'd come in early in the morning, before daylight, and look up on his hill, and his bedroom light would be on. He'd wake up at 3 or 4 in the morning and read for hours. I'd turn my office lights on, and he'd call and say, "See you're in early this morning." I'd say, "I see you're up reading." He'd tell me what he was reading and ask me what I was reading. I'd tell him, and he would say, "When are you gonna quit reading that trash and read something worthwhile?" Then he would say, "I've got something I want you to read." He was always suggesting books for me to read. When he passed away, it was really a tough time for me.

AC: Is there anything you want to say about Albert Stewart?

MM: I always described Al as somebody who was independent to the 10th power. Al had a way of endearing himself to you and ticking you off at the same time. We had an up-and-down relationship, and it took me a while to realize that I was playing Al's game when we would get into one of our tiffs. When we were at Alice Lloyd together, I was supposedly over the magazine as director of the Appalachian Learning Laboratory, but nobody was Albert Stewart's boss. He answered to no one.

Of course, he loved the Settlement School. He grew up there. When I took over as director, it took him a while to appreciate all that I was doing. Al Stewart is one of those people who, well, there is a dissertation there. He was one of the most knowledgeable people about Appalachian literature in the United States. He and Cratis Williams were probably two of the earliest ones who really helped to develop an appreciation of the literature of the region.

Al was a pioneer. He was doing writers workshops using Harriette Arnow and other writers from the region in the '60s at Morehead State University when nobody else was even thinking about it. His gift, what he gave to the region, was nurturing writers through those workshops and through the founding and editing of *Appalachian Heritage* magazine. He gave them a place to have their voice in literature when there was no place else. He did a service that hasn't been matched.

On a personal level, he could be the most cantankerous person you've ever met, but he was also brilliant. He knew good writing, and he was a perfectionist in that area. He was a fantastic poet. He left a legacy through the magazine, through writers workshops, and through his own writings.

He was a difficult personality. He liked being difficult. He got enjoyment out of it. Those of us who knew him loved him and just wanted to kick his hind end at the same time. My life would not have been the same without having known Al because he challenged me in ways that made me a better person. He is a very difficult person to describe, but creative people march to a different beat and see the world in a different way. They can't understand why some of us can't understand their way, and they usually don't want to understand our way. Al was that sort. His poetry in *The Untoward Hills* reminds me a lot of Jeff Daniel Marion's. His poetry is about the hills he loved.

AC: What is your best memory of the Writers Workshop?

MM: I have done 28 workshops. That's like asking me which one of my kids I like the best.

It is probably seeing Mr. Still and Randy Wilson doing the *River of Earth* program with Mr. Still reading and Randy playing music. Mr. Still had the audience clapping their hands as Randy played the banjo. He had the audience in the palm of his hand, and then finished up by reading his wonderful poem "Heritage." Seeing that program on that stage is probably my best memory.

The tribute we did after Jim Wayne Miller's passing, that was the most emotional. John Egerton, Lee Smith, and Robert Morgan spoke from the stage, and then we had several participants share from the audience.

There are moments in that Great Hall, the room where we have our readings, when there is no place you'd rather be. You're sitting there thinking, "How can it get any better than this?" You never know what's going to happen. You just get up and go, "Aahh, I would not want to be anywhere else on the face of this earth than right here in this chair on this night hearing what I have heard, experiencing what I am experiencing." Those are magical moments, folks, and there have been so many of them.

Part of "A Great Work"

MT: As Hindman's director you have administrative and fund raising responsibilities. Recent successes include building a bridge, library, classroom building, and strengthening the school's financial base. How do you negotiate diverse constituencies such as temperamental writers, the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), parents and children with special needs, local officials, and community members?

MM: What a question! It's a process, and you learn to grow administratively working with the various groups and situations. Let's talk about administration. One of the greatest administrators I've know was right there [pointing to a photo of Cratis Williams]. I asked Cratis Williams once, why are you such an effective administrator and how do you get people to do what you

want them to do? His answer was, "First of all, I see myself as a fellow worker. Sometimes my job is to make sure other people do their jobs, but my goal is to have these people want to do their jobs to the point that I don't really have to do anything to make them to do it. I want them to take such pride in it and feel that is so worthwhile that I don't have to be an administrator. I just have to be there as a guide."

That is my philosophy of administration. I see myself as a fellow worker with all the other people on campus. I hate the word "boss." We are all there to get a job done, and sometimes I have to provide direction. But I am a fellow worker, and we're all in the same boat together. We must work together; otherwise, the boat will sink. I appreciate my fellow workers, and I need for them to buy into what this place is all about. They need to know that they are part of "a great work." We all want to be part of something that is important. That is human nature.

The other thing I must do is always give credit. It's not what *I* do—it's what *we* do. I could not do what I do without the wonderful people who help make me look good. I often say there are times when some of my staff want to kill me, but they also will kill for me.

When I came to the Settlement School, none of the board meetings were held on campus. The staff had no idea how decisions were made, how monies were spent. I told the board I didn't want to be the director unless they met on the campus. It didn't make sense to me for them to meet in Lexington or Louisville, and not on the campus. I heard later on that some board members voted against me because they didn't think I should make such demands. But the Settlement School belongs to the public. Therefore, everything we do is for the public good, and the public and my staff should know about it. From the get-go, every board meeting has been open to the staff. None of them had ever been to a board meeting before. Now they hear everything, and it's gotten to the point that many of them say, "do I have to go the board meeting?" I say, "I want you there." In 28 years, we have only had to go into executive session once, and that was to hire a firm for a fund drive. They hear the audit, the good, the bad, and the ugly. There is nothing left to their imagination.

In an institution like the Settlement School, you constantly have to make decisions about staffing, programming, and buildings, and they are tough decisions when you have limited funds. If you don't keep up your campus, then it will fall into disrepair. The more you let things go, the more they cost later on. My biggest failure as director (and the thing that has hurt me the most) is I've not been able to give these wonderful people what they deserve.

I've been director for 28 years, and my daughter, who has worked for the social security administration for eight years, makes more money than I do. I couldn't care less. I choose what I do, and that's my decision. I'm not bad mouthing the fact that I am not making a lot of money, and I'm no martyr. That's not why I am at the Settlement. It's not a job to me. It's my life.

Developing an administrative process where staff and board members are very much involved in the decision making is my goal. The bottom line is we are a family, and you know how families can be sometimes. I have been told by

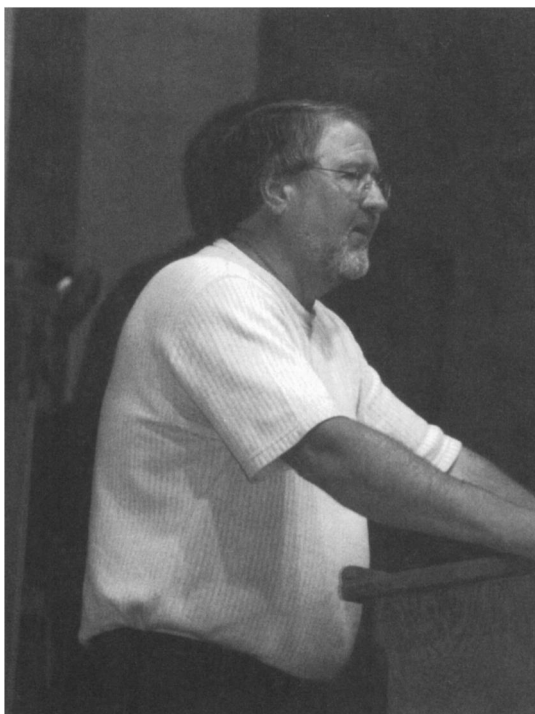


Photo by Judith Hensley

certain friends of mine that I get too close to my staff. I probably do, but that's just who I am. When they hurt, I hurt. I know all of their children and their families. If getting too close to my staff hurts me administratively, I am willing to accept it because the good far outweighs the bad. We are family, and we support each other.

Now, on fund raising. If you've read Jess Stoddart's book, she says that during my time at Hindman Settlement School I've raised somewhere in the neighborhood of 20 million dollars. Fund

raising is basically people giving to people who they believe will do good things with their money. The bottom line is you develop credibility. You do what you say you're going to do, and the word spreads. I hope I've developed a certain amount of credibility in the fund-raising world. One of the main things we stress is that we make a dollar go as far as it can go. We try to be good stewards of the support we receive.

Fund raising is both the most frustrating and the most uplifting process that you'll ever be involved in. I tell people that in giving a gift, investing, or supporting the Hindman Settlement School, you're involved in a great work. If you want to be a part of it, we're going to give you that opportunity. In fund raising, there are only two answers: yes or no. Maybe doesn't put money in the bank.

I'm always fund raising. When I go to lunch at the mini-mall and sit around shooting the bull with some local friends, I'm fund raising. It's flying to Detroit, Michigan, like I did two weeks ago, and speaking to a DAR chapter that gave us \$100,000. It's flying the next week down to Atlanta to talk to another DAR chapter. As far as I'm concerned, I'm fund raising right now. You're doing this interview, and I appreciate it, but I'm doing it because Hindman Settlement School's name is going to be in a whole lot of magazines. I'll be real honest with you. Exposure! Exposure! Exposure! You can't get enough.

Some of the things you mentioned in your question are actually part of the CDI [Community Development Initiative]. The bridge is part of the CDI, and it's not a Settlement-funded project. I am a very political person, and I have used my political connections to get some good things done that have been beneficial to the Settlement and to the community. When I came to Hindman, we had \$1.5 million in our endowment. Now we have a little over \$8 million. During the time we were building up our endowment, we were also making major repairs and renovations to the campus. What do we need? We need \$20 million in endowment. I hope that once I leave the Settlement someone will take over and build on what I have built. I am always looking at the glass as being half full rather than half empty. I often say there are people out there waiting to give me a bunch of money. I am just waiting to run into them.

On handling diverse constituencies, I don't see it as any great art. I love people. I like dealing with people. I'm as comfortable with someone from the end of a holler as I am with someone from 5th Avenue in New York City. I am comfortable with who I am. We all have different backgrounds and needs. I see people as friends I haven't made yet.

You mentioned the DAR. I've developed a certain rapport with DAR members all over this country. I have a lot of wonderful friends in this organization. The NSDAR [National Society Daughters of the American Revolution] has been very supportive of our work.

Believe it or not, not everybody in Knott County loves Mike Mullins. One group would love to run me out of the county if they could, but most of them are going to jail. I've done nothing that I am ashamed of. I've not bought votes or misused funds. I get audited every year. My books and everything are open to the public. I have been in opposition to what I consider is bad for the community. I've not endeared myself to everyone, and I don't care. I am there for the duration.

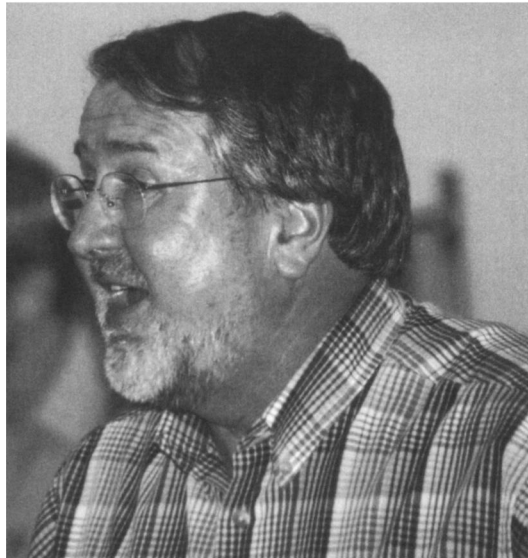


Photo by Judith Hensley

Groundwork for the Future

MT: Who are your principal financial supporters of the Hindman Settlement School?

MM: In an institution like the Settlement, it is the people on your mailing list. These are the people that send you the \$25 to \$100 gift every year, who may increase it for special occasions to \$500 or \$1000. We have about 9000 names on that list. The list is comprised of all the individuals, groups, and organizations who believe in our work. There are several foundations, especially in Kentucky, that have been very supportive. The DAR. We generate some funding from our Family Folk Week, the Appalachian Writers Workshop, and our conference center-related activities. Then there are those people out there we don't even know who remember us in their wills and estates.

Let me tell you this story. About eight years ago, an Elderhostel group came to campus. Doris Miller, my assistant, showed them the video about our work. After the presentation, one person asked if we had any special needs. Doris told her that we were working on a major project to build a new kitchen. The lady then asked that we send her some information about this project. This was near the end of October. She wrote her name and address on the back of a brochure, and Doris left it on my desk. When people do that, it could lead to a gift of \$100 or \$500. You never know.

Before Thanksgiving, I got a call from this lady asking about our kitchen project. I had a general letter that I was using for inquiries about this project, so I sent it to her. I included an architect's rendering of what we were proposing. This kitchen project started out as let's fix the sink falling through the floor. Then a board member said, "What we really need is a new kitchen." So we embarked on a project that was going to cost about \$300,000.

After receiving the information, the Elderhostel lady called and asked how much would it cost to get the kitchen project started. We only had about \$50,000 so I said we would have to have at least another \$150,000 to start building. After Christmas, I went to get the mail on a cold Saturday morning, and there was a letter from our Elderhostel friend and a \$150,000 check. Now, I can write a big check, but it is not going to be any good. This check was good. \$150,000. That can make a man's day.

Three weeks later, I got another check for \$150,000 from her sister who wanted to match her sister's gift. That's \$300,000 from the two of them.

We were building the kitchen onto the May Stone Building, which had a lot of other needs. During a phone conversation with our generous friend, she asked, "what are your other needs relating to this project?" I outlined an additional \$185,000 in needed repairs, and she sent us a check for \$185,000. She gave almost \$700,000 before it was all said and done. The kitchen project went from \$300,000 to \$1,000,000, and we did not incur any debt.

Here's another fund-raising story. A longtime friend from a DAR chapter that had given us \$5000 and \$10,000 gifts over the years called me. She said, "Are you sitting down? You may even want to lay down." I asked why and she said, "We're giving your school \$100,000." I said, "I'll lay down right now."

I was expecting \$10,000. I am constantly out beating the bushes. It's a love and hate relationship doing development. I don't think I am that good at it, but I have been fairly successful.

I've recently hired a development director because I can't do all the things that need to be done. I should have done this ten years ago. I have hired this dynamo of a person, Jeanne Marie Hibberd. She is a Berea College graduate and has been in fund raising and program development for about 20 years. She has been working at Berea, running their Appalachian Fund, and we are one of the groups they support. She's crazy enough to work for me, and it's going to be exciting to have someone working full time on development. She also has the ability to be the director of the Settlement. I think the challenge of starting up a development office and knowing that one day she could be in charge really appealed to her. I hope I am around a little longer because there are some things I'd like to accomplish. But I'd like to make sure we have somebody who could take over if I'm not around. My goal is to work another eight to ten years. There are some things down the line, politically, that could get me to leave sooner, but they are at least four to five years away. It all depends on if I'm on the winning side. If it happens, it happens. If not, I am happy.

MT: What do you see for the future of Hindman?

MM: Succession is a very important topic that has to be addressed. This past year we embarked on a major strategic planning process to look inwardly at our finances, programming, and where we should be in five years. During this process, one of the major things we addressed was the idea of succession. A lot of places get too dependent on individuals. And to a certain extent, Hindman Settlement School has done that with me. I want to change that. It's important to me to make sure that the Settlement School goes on without me.

I think the future depends on my turning over more and more to others. Strengthening the board and making sure the board provides the necessary leadership is also very important. I have an excellent board, and it is getting better. The board will determine the future through hiring and the continuation of programming. It is crucial that we look at this now and not wait until the last minute. I think succession is a five- to ten-year process. I have seen institutions with strong, dynamic leaders who died and left a tremendous vacuum. I tell myself, don't ever believe that you can't be replaced. Nobody could ever fill Cratis Williams' or Miss Watts' shoes, but preparations must be made to find someone who can move the institution forward once there is a vacancy at the top.

I've been part of Leadership Kentucky. I've helped start East Kentucky Leadership Foundation and Leadership Knott County. Leadership, in my opinion, comes down to what Jesus Christ taught us: the greatest leaders are those who serve others. If you're trying to lead and nobody's following, then you aren't much of a leader. However, if you're leading by serving, then you're out there working with the people.

MT: What do you see for your future?

MM: I want to spend more time with my three children. I have a daughter who is 32 and doing great. She recently married a wonderful young man. I have a daughter who's 28 and the mother of my first grandchild, Riley, who is the apple of my eye. And she is pregnant with our second grandchild. I also have a son, 25, who will graduate from medical school this May. I want to be there for my children and my grandchildren.

I want to make sure I leave a firm financial foundation for the continuation of the Hindman Settlement School. I want to raise a lot of money over the next several years and put it in the endowment to ensure that future. I want to set up another major fund at the Settlement with my wife so our legacy will be there in another way. I want to retire when I leave the Settlement, but continue with other interests that I have put off because I didn't have the time.

At heart, I am a '60s radical. I want to get involved in saving what's left of our mountains and streams by working with community groups like Kentuckians for the Commonwealth. I want to live by the philosophy of Mother Jones: "Pray for the dead, and fight like hell for the living." That's my goal. And I want to listen to a lot of good bluegrass music.



Michael Troy, Ashley Crabtree, Mike Mullins, Katie Gray, Dare Cook, Aaron Davis, and Patricia Beaver, October 26, 2005.