



**PART TWO**

**THE VOICES OF RURAL  
CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

Smiles from the  
Central California Valley

**T**he voices of children and young people put a face on statistics in this report. Most of these children have grown up in environments that are extremely challenging — because of family problems, isolation, or poverty. Yet, their stories illustrate what is needed to overcome poverty. They show the importance of caring adults in their lives, whether parents, relatives, teachers, coaches, or mentors. They stress the need for constructive activities and talk about what happens without them. Some of these voices describe the power of “giving back” as a way of enhancing their own lives. Finally, they provide hope. Among them are outstanding young leaders who could well make a real difference in the lives of the next generation if they stay in their communities. As Craven Cook of Marks, Mississippi, so aptly said, *“We need to start with the young people to rebuild the community. If they grow up just seeing all the things that are wrong, they’re going to fall into the same traps. You’ve got to start by teaching the children the right way and show them that they have hope and opportunity — you know?”*

These voices also tell us about problems that are not captured in the statistics: the effects of racism and classism on education and opportunities, the impact of school consolidation on small communities, the consequences of parental substance abuse across generations, the problem of teen pregnancy, and the lack of constructive activities outside school. Now we hear from these young people and learn about their lives and the pockets of poverty where they live.

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Tommiea Jackson:

## The “Brain Drain” Dilemma

**At 23, Tommiea Jackson is a rare example of an educated young person who chose to move back to her community. With the problem of rural “brain drain” robbing many communities of effective leaders, her dilemma has an impact on the future of these communities. Tommiea lives with her parents, sister, and brother in her childhood home in Marks, Mississippi. Since returning with a master’s degree in journalism from the University of Mississippi, she has been a youth coordinator for the Quitman County Development Organization, her position paid for by VISTA/AmeriCorps. Tommiea received full scholarships for both college and graduate school and decided to return to give back to her community. In a teary, emotional interview, she tells about her community, her family, and her decision to return.**

I came back to Marks because I needed a job and I wanted to do something at home. I don’t know if I’ll be here forever, but I need to do something for my people — for the kids. Yet I’m here, and it feels like I’m nowhere. My uncle is a leader in this community, and he does a lot. After being around him, you think you want to do something too. But this is hard, because all the people who go to college around here, they leave immediately,

and no one actually comes back. So everyone’s gone. I mean, I can’t count any of my classmates who went to college who are here.

But I want to be here — God knows. But there are so many other things I want to do with my life. I’d love to get a job working for a magazine. I’d love to go to New York. My uncle always tells me that it’s hard to get people to forego the riches of the world. Yet the thing that is keeping me here is the kids. Gosh, they’ll live in my office if I let them. They need so much. We do have a program here, but there are only so many kids that we can handle. And there’s really no other place for them to go. They relate to me because I’m young and they think I’m different. I listen to the same music that they do and I guess I’m a good role model. It’s just so painful because I talk to my friends from college and grad school, and they all seem to be doing bigger things, making so much more money. When I tell them that I’m living at home with my parents, it seems like they are doing so much better than me. I do think what I’m doing is important — gosh, there’s no one else doing what I’m doing for these kids. I love these kids, yet when I recently told my sorority sister what I’m doing, she asked why.

I just think that these kids listen to me and hear what I say. I recently had a conversation with a 12-year-old girl who told me that her best friend is pregnant. We talked, and I told her about my life and that if I had a child I couldn’t have done any of the things that I’ve done. I think she heard me. Some of the girls tell me that they want to be just like me. This is why it’s so hard to leave. I often just sit and cry.

So many little girls around here get pregnant. I’m convinced it’s because they have nothing else to do. I just think that if they had something else to do and someone else to tell them that it hurts you to get pregnant, then maybe it would be different. The kids around here really need a recreation center. They need to see that there is more out there than just Marks or Batesville. They need to get out and see. Then they might become interested in different things. Now, they see the new casino that is only one hour away. They see that they can get a job and earn money. They think that if they can make good money at the casino, they don’t need to finish school. And lots of them drop out.

## Did you know . . .

A region's unemployment rate is a good predictor of whether young people choose to stay or leave rural areas. An increase in employment increases the likelihood that young people will stay. <sup>46</sup>



Tommiea Jackson

Photo by Kate Lapidés

It can be pretty tough around here. You see that train track over there? It literally divides the community. Almost 98-99 percent of the kids in this school system are black. In the private school on the other side of town, the kids are all white. When I see a white child going to the public school, I feel so sad, because you know that his or her family is *really* poor. They're really poor. White and black kids have *nooooo* interaction with each other. Our kids see the white kids from the private school going to Europe for

their senior class trip. Our kids go twenty minutes away to Clarksdale — ya know, it's just really sad.

I think the thing that helped me was my family. I'm the only one of all my friends growing up who had both parents living at home. Although we didn't have a lot of money, we took vacations every year. We drove to a lot of places. I always knew that there was a big world outside of Marks, Mississippi. So, for me, college was always the next step. I never thought otherwise.

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Focus on the

# Mississippi River Delta



A famous street in Marks, Mississippi

Photo by Bill Munro

Only a few hours outside Memphis, the Mississippi River Delta is a completely different world. As the home of the “blues,” the Delta region has left an important cultural imprint on music, both in the United States and abroad. And it has some of the most fertile soil in the country, producing cotton, corn, soybeans, and rice. Yet mechanization, pesticides, lumbering, and manufacturing have led to erosion and water pollution. Although nowhere in sight, the Mississippi River is the defining feature of life in the Delta.

The people and events that have brought the Delta national attention — slavery, the Underground Railroad, the Civil War, segregation, the Ku Klux Klan, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Jim Crow laws, the sharecroppers, and wealthy farmers and the poor living in a land of prosperity — continue to affect the Delta and its people. The persistent poverty and racism that have plagued the Delta for generations continue today. As Tommiea Jackson (see page 46) told us, this entrenched poverty drives out homegrown talent and makes it difficult to cultivate effective local leaders.

The problem of racism was discussed by several people we interviewed from the Delta. A 19-year-old single mother from a small community in Arkansas gives her account: *“This is a racist town. This is not a black people’s town — it’s a white people’s town. I’m just telling you how it is, how it’s been for a very long time. The race stuff here is real bad. It affects us bad. It’s not just the people; it’s even the police officers. The white officers, I mean they drive around constantly, all morning, all day, and all night and they just H-A-R-A-S-S. Harass. I even saw an officer harass my cousin with my own two eyes when he did absolutely nothing. If black kids go somewhere and they just want to hang out, the officers always break it up and take ’em into jail. But white kids — they can go anywhere, day or night, to drink and smoke, with their cars parked right there all night long. And they never, ever stop them. Never, ever. And they hang out seven days a week. And you know what? No white kids ever get into trouble with the officers.”*

## SNAPSHOT: Quitman County, Mississippi

These figures provide a picture of a typical county in the Mississippi River Delta.

2000 population	10,177: 68.6% black, 30.3% white
Children 0 -17 living in poverty (1999)	43.2%
Free and reduced lunches (2001)	approximately 80%
High school graduates (over 25 years old)	approximately 27%
College graduates (over 25 years old)	approximately 5%
Median household income (1997)	\$18,118
% enrolled in Medicaid (2000)	21%
% births to single mothers (1999)	75%
Annual unemployment rate (1999)	9%

Source: US Census Bureau, State and County Quickfacts, 2000.

### Race: The Problem Persists

In Quitman County, only one of five students who started public high school graduated with their class in 2001. Racial segregation in the schools is a telling feature and has a negative effect on the children. In 2001, 97 percent of the children in the high school were black; 3 percent were white: According to Craven Cook, *“I guess you could say our community is divided — you know — blacks and whites. It brings the whole community down when everyone does what they want to do and they don’t work together. Like in sports, the white kids go to the playoffs every year and it’s a really big deal — the whole community gets behind them. They have fancy uniforms and good equipment and stuff. When we go to the playoffs, we don’t have that much. We try to work with what we have; the church and school help out a little. But the community doesn’t get behind us. You never see our scores in the newspaper. It makes you feel real bad after awhile.”*

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Isaac Fields:

## Promise Uncovered

**Isaac Fields, 19 years old, comes from a tight-knit family of six children, most of whom left the mountains after college. His story illustrates the classism faced by many poor rural youth who travel long distances to attend school with wealthier “city” kids. Snubbed by educators as “a poor kid” who didn’t hold much promise, Isaac is an example of how strong family support and opportunities to develop leadership skills have made him a leader in his community. On any given day, he can be found in the PowerUP! Lab at the Cowan Community Center in Letcher County, Kentucky, working as an AmeriCorps/VISTA volunteer. (See pages 82 and 83 for more information about these programs.) The center is the only place in the community that offers myriad services to children and adults, including tutoring, after-school programs, and computer training.**

I live in a hollow near Cowan. It’s our own community. In the mountains, the streams carve out a natural roadway, and the roads get hollowed by the water. The hollow that I live in is Bo Fork, and it has about 20 houses and stretches for several miles. It’s graveled with no street signs. Now I consider the town of Cowan to be my community, but when I was younger, the hollow was my community.



Isaac Fields

Photo by Bob Winsett

When I was about 11 years old, I started getting involved in the youth group here at the Cowan Community Center. All my brothers and sisters were involved also, and this has had a big impact on my entire family. Many poor kids growing up in this area are very shy and reserved, and this is how I used to be. I could barely talk to people and look them in the eye. I had no self-confidence. Everyone here is brought up to feel self-conscious about being from eastern Kentucky. I knew all about the stereotypes that people had about me and my people. I’ve learned that it’s not bad to be a hillbilly, and I am proud of my background. My experience with the youth group helped to push me into situations where I learned that I had ideas and opinions and that it was okay to express them. I discovered that I had a powerful voice, and I developed a self-confidence that many others around here don’t have.

After a few years, I became a leader in the youth group and eventually its president. As president, I learned how to facilitate meetings and help to develop our team. We did several

***“There is a definite prejudice against the poor kids. They feel lonely at school, are chastised by the other kids, and are treated differently by the teachers. The school system around here puts everyone in their place. The poor kids can never be the cheerleaders. They know this, and it really affects their self-confidence. They grow up without any hope. Hopelessness is a lack of power. This lack of power is like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Kids get beaten down, and after awhile they just give up trying.”***

— Tracy Frazier  
Letcher County Community Action Team

community service projects, such as cleaning up the rivers throughout our community. Save the Children provided us with the funding to go to a statewide leadership training conference. It was here that I met other kids from eastern Kentucky who went through these types of programs. Through this training, we became more aware of our community issues and more empowered to try new things to improve our communities. We learned that regardless of what we learn, we are the only ones who can truly help ourselves. We can get the best training in the world, but it doesn't matter unless we use it in the right way. I think that many of us who attended became more self-confident and ultimately better people.

Another program that was very valuable to me was Upward Bound. We took trips to D.C., New York City, and Chicago. This travel experience was so important in giving me a broader understanding that although all *places* are different, the *people* are basically the same everywhere. We all have the same problems. I realized that although people might believe the stereotype about me, I was not so different.

I think that a lot of kids growing up in this region are not as lucky as I have been. Lots of kids drop out of high school, and lots use drugs. But I think the biggest issue facing our youth is a lack of things to do. There is really nothing *to* do. This center is the only place around where kids can come after school, use the computers, play basketball, get homework support, and just hang out without getting into trouble. I'm convinced that without positive activities, kids get into trouble. They go on top of the strip mines and have parties and get drunk.

Poor kids in our area can't get an adequate education — it's very biased. There are basically the kids who “have” and the kids who don't. I'm convinced that this affects a teacher's

judgment of a child. There is big discrimination. I've seen how the rich kids get more attention and more help in school. The kids who really need help often do not get it. They just fall through the cracks and end up dropping out of school. I was considered one of these poor kids, and I saw the way that the teachers treated me. I did the same work and got the same grades as the rich kids — but I was treated completely different. I was often ignored and nobody helped me. Even after I had failed a few classes, nobody even noticed . . . I remember my mom telling me about an incident with my sister. She had made all A's on her report card and one time came home with a D. When my mom called the guidance counselor, she was told, “She's not going to college anyway, so don't worry about it.” My mom did worry about it, and my sister did go to college.

I know that the government has spent a lot of money for nicer schools. I believe that they are more concerned with the way the schools look than in the education they provide. Although I don't think that I got a good education, college has always been part of my plan. That's why I have this VISTA position, so that I can save money for college.

## Did you know . . .

***“Abuse of prescription drugs is a real epidemic plaguing the region and is responsible for 60 drug-related deaths in Letcher Country over the past year.”***

— Tracy Frazier  
Letcher County Community Action Team

Focus on

# Appalachia



A coal field in Kelly Fork, Kentucky

Photo by Bob Winsett

The plight of central Appalachia is deeply rooted in its history. Dating from the early 20th century, this region began to prosper as companies in other states recognized its abundance of coal, a valuable natural resource imbedded deep in these mountains. As coal companies moved into the region, other industries followed. Railroads and steel and power plants were built. The coal companies bought the rights to mine the land, often from unsophisticated residents who signed away their property for as little as 50 cents an acre. Gradually, as the coal companies gained more power and employed many people, the residents were forced into a two-tiered class structure that exploited their lack of education and skills and eventually rendered them powerless. In an effort to control their employees, companies moved the miners into company-run coal camps, which provided housing, schools, and health care. The

workers were required to use these services and to shop at the overpriced company stores. Much like an ancient fiefdom, this structure created a society of “haves” and “have-nots,” which continues to dominate the region. Many believe that this dependency on the coal companies kept the workers’ families from becoming self-sufficient and solving the problems of their communities. After many companies left in the 1950s, taking with them a massive transfer of wealth, mechanization replaced many of the coal jobs; those who remained were largely uneducated, unemployed, and disabled (often from black lung disease), and were relegated to a life of poverty.

The absence of a public sector and a shortage of local leadership have left fragile support systems in the region. When millions of federal dollars were poured into the area in the 1960s, the

structure for using this money constructively was virtually nonexistent. Although the situation is somewhat better today, similar problems continue to hamper development.

After years of powerlessness resulting from corporate paternalism, there remains a distrust of the institutions that might permit positive change. Decades of corporate exploitation have weakened the civic structures that make up a viable community. Much work is needed to dissolve the longstanding tensions between economic gain and the environmental problems caused by the exploitation of natural resources. And additional work is needed to give the community the self-confidence to generate civic participation and responsible government. Community leaders, such as Tracy Frazier from the Letcher County Community Action Team, believe that “we need

to empower the people. In most places, when something is wrong, people try to fix it. Here, people feel that they can’t. Nobody trusts that change is possible. I believe that change must come from within. We have lots of work to do to involve all sectors of our community to join together to create change.”

Another problem is the way the people are viewed by the institutions, both public and private, that provide funds. *“We are very white,”* says a community leader, *“but when you look at resources for poor people, they mostly target minorities. Appalachian white people need to be viewed as a minority population, because we miss out on so much of the funding. Our people have all the same risk factors as poor minorities: low education, poor schools, high rates of asthma, diabetes, and more general health problems. We are the same.”*

## SNAPSHOT: Letcher County, Kentucky

These figures provide a picture of a typical county in Appalachian Kentucky. The comparatively high median household income — resulting from the averaging of the incomes of more affluent residents with those of the poor families — clearly shows how poverty can get hidden when wealthy people are part of the population.

Letcher County was ranked number 102 of 120 counties in the state on child well being.<sup>47</sup>

2000 population	25,277 (98% white)
Children 0-17 living in poverty (1999)	36.2%
Children 0-5 living in poverty (1997)	41% (vs. 27% for state)
Free and reduced lunches (2001)	approximately 66%
High school graduates (over 25 years old)	approximately 30%
College graduates (over 25 years old)	approximately 4%
Median household income (1997)	\$22,893
Source: US Census Bureau, State and County Quickfacts, 2000.	

- One registered nurse and one licensed practical nurse serve 13 public schools.
- One mental health agency provides services to Letcher and seven other counties.

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JoJo\*:

## Adult Mentors Help Beat the Odds

**JoJo\* is entering his senior year in a community in the Appalachian mountains of northern Tennessee. His story exemplifies the importance of caring adults in the life of a young person whose family cannot provide support. JoJo\*'s chess coach and other adult advocates have faced a constant struggle to keep him in school and help him develop a skill that could lead to a college scholarship. His story is a remarkable testimony of a boy being pulled out of the dark shadow of poverty, with an opportunity for a bright future but always living just on the edge.**

**JoJo\* would not talk about his family. When asked, he gracefully changed the subject. We learned, however, that he lives in a dilapidated house with no front door. It has no heat or running water, and his family finds it very difficult in the winter. His 42-year-old mother has suffered four strokes and spends much of her time in a wheelchair. His father, an alcoholic and substance abuser, is often drunk and physically abusive. Intense fighting and physical abuse**

**are common in the family, and life at home is often so unbearable that JoJo finds other places to spend his days and nights. His chess coach and mentor has had to purchase shoes and clothing so that JoJo can participate in tournaments.**

I knew nothing about chess until I was in the 7th grade. I came to this center one day and watched the older boys play. I thought it was really cool. I kept coming until I learned moves and started playing myself. In 8th grade I started playing in chess tournaments and started getting pretty good. Since then, I've been playing on our chess team. I get to travel to tournaments, and I was in Missouri a few weeks ago for the nationals. We got runner-up — second place out of seven teams from all over the country. This was good, but last year we actually won the whole thing — first place.

I'm not a master yet, but will be someday. To be a master, you need 2,300 points, and I'm only at 1,370. By next year I'll probably be at 1,700. Even though I'm not a master, I've beaten many great players and have met some of the world's masters. I like to pick people's minds. My goal is just to do my best and to help my team. The team always comes first. I love the feeling that you get after you win and you walk on the stage to get the trophy and then you get to carry it around. It's such a good feeling.

I guess our whole team is kind of famous around here because we've accomplished so much. We work really hard at it too. We're constantly doing stuff like publicity, thank you visits to banks and other contributors. Mr. Smith\* makes sure that we get everything we need to be able to travel to tournaments. If it weren't for Mr. Smith, I would never have started playing chess. And I would definitely not be here right now. And if I wasn't playing chess, I would never have met the people I've met and seen the things I've seen.



\*A chess player

Photo by Bob Winsett

I like living here. Everybody knows everybody, and if someone new moves in, then everyone is real nice to them and makes them feel at home. There is no violence and drive-by stuff around here, like in bigger cities. But there are bad things around here too. People call this place GreenGrange. The stuff [marijuana] grows all over, even on the side of the road, and you can smell it. It's pretty bad. Lots of kids get messed up and then go to school. I've seen how the stuff can mess you up. My uncle drinks and smokes a lot. His wife left him, and he has no money. I've seen what drinking and drugs can do to you. I see how kids drop out of school because they are so messed up.

Chess has definitely kept me in school. If I ever dropped out, I couldn't be on the team. But if it wasn't for chess and for Mr.

Smith, I probably would be a dropout already. There was a time when I pulled my back out from hanging sheetrock and I just didn't show up at school for awhile. The school was threatening to throw me out, but Mr. Smith and Ms. Beatrice\* fought for me to stay. Mr. Smith said, "You don't want to be a redneck and just quit." He's not like a teacher, he's one of our best friends. We go over to his house and watch football games and stuff. Sometimes I even stay over there. He jokes around with us and helps us with our work. Not many people find a teacher like him — he's more like a friend.

I would like to go to college someday. Mr. Smith and Ms. Beatrice are helping to get me a scholarship. I'm pretty good in math and stuff, and I want to major in computer technology.

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Vianna Gomez:

# The Importance of Leadership Programs

**Vianna Gomez, 16 years old, lives in Farmersville, a rural community in the heart of California's Central Valley. Her experience with the Future Farmers of America (FFA), a national leadership organization, has given her the opportunity to learn skills and understand the importance of an education. Until two years ago, she and her family lived in Linnel Camp, a migrant camp in Visalia for families who work in the fields. Vianna lives with both parents; her dad, a Mexican immigrant, is a migrant laborer, and her mother, a US citizen, works at the childcare center in the camp. Now an officer in FFA, Vianna describes her struggles in the past and discusses her excitement about her school activities and her hopes for the future.**

I moved from the Linnel Camp in Visalia about two years ago. Linnel Camp is a community for farmworkers. It was, like, kind of difficult. We didn't have opportunities that other kids had. There's a little park inside the camp, and all the kids go and play baseball and soccer. We didn't have our own yards, so we shared yards. They had a study hall on Tuesdays and Wednesdays in Linnel Camp, but I don't know if they have it anymore. If you had problems with homework or something, they had it open, so I went there sometimes when I needed help. There's also a center

inside Linnel, and sometimes they have different stuff going on for the kids so we didn't get bored. But sometimes they didn't open the center for months.

Here in Farmersville we have our own house. It's better. The community is different too. It's quiet, peaceful. It's better because I can do my homework and, you know, not hear the racket of all the kids in the camp.

Math is the hardest subject for me and for a lot of other kids, too. Lots of students are really failing math, and we need people who will help tutor us, 'cause that subject is really hard. I think that our school should expand the library — you probably couldn't even fit nobody in there. They should have computers in there so kids can have their reports, 'cause teachers now don't allow handwritten reports, they're all typed. But we need computers to type with.

My grades are getting better now. I messed up my first two years. I regret it. I guess I was having some troubles, and it took too much of my time. But now I'm in FFA, and I'm an officer for the junior class. And my grades are better, actually.

FFA is actually a good program for the school because it changes your perspective and you learn about communication and public speaking and you learn how to work with one another. We do competitions and learn a lot of study skills, and we do lots of presentations and speeches in front of class, in front of other people, you know. We have, like, a computer contest to learn about computers, and we learn how farming is done and stuff like that. You also learn how to become a good leader, and there's a lot of stuff that you have to do that's good for your community. Usually we help pass out food during Thanksgiving, and we do canned food drives and we pass the stuff out at Christmas.

People around here need motivation. Because a lot of people that live here, their parents come from Mexico and they didn't get an education, so, you know, they don't push their kids to go to college, to get an education. And then, when kids' report cards come home they won't care, because they don't know what it means.



Vianna Gomez

Photo by Kate Lapides

A lot of people around here, they're alcoholics. The kids have lots of problems, they get beat up, and there is nowhere to go. A community center would be good for them to relieve their stress and get away for a little bit. Kids around here need someone to talk to, because instead of trying to solve their problems, they go and do something bad. We do have a school psychologist, and most students are scared of him, but I think he's really good. I can trust him. Like when I had a lot of problems, I would talk to people and they would say, "Hey, what's up with your arm?" After talking to Mr. Carrillo I started finding out that I wasn't the only one doing this. And he wanted to start a program, for kids who you know, hurt themselves and stuff like that.

Yeah, I don't know why I hurt myself — problems I guess. But then sometimes I did it just to do it. But now I don't do it anymore because I'm better.

I want to go to college and study psychology. I visited some campuses with FFA, and the one that I liked best was Santa Cruz. But I don't know. Maybe next year I might take my basics at the local community college and then, after I graduate, I can transfer over there. 'Cause, it's like hard and very expensive.

## Did You Know . . .

Children of migrant workers may be vulnerable to harmful pesticides. Chemicals are often found on their parents' clothes and skin and in their homes, making their children vulnerable to high levels of these chemicals and therefore at high risk for related illnesses. Pesticide exposure can result in serious chronic health problems, including chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances, anxiety, memory problems, cancer, and birth defects. An estimated 313,000 farmworkers in the US may suffer from illness caused by pesticides, leading to approximately 800–1,000 deaths each year. <sup>48</sup>

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## Focus on the

# Central California Valley



A boarded-up storefront in the Central California Valley

Photo by Kate Lapidés

Agriculture, one of California's most important industries, has experienced significant growth in recent decades. Today, more than 50 percent of the major vegetable and 40 percent of the major fruit production in the country come from California. Predictably, perhaps, there is a huge disparity in the quality of life between those who own the land and those who work it.

The history of farmworkers in California's Central Valley dates from the 1760s, when the Spaniards brought laborers north from Mexico and Baja, California, to colonize and farm Northern California.<sup>49</sup> Immigrants, mainly from Mexico, have settled in California in large part because of the Bracero Program, an agreement between the two countries that allowed the United States to import low-paid Mexican laborers. This program was signed into law in 1951.

The farmworkers have faced many struggles, beginning with attempts to organize unions that started as early as 1910. Wealthy farmers and the government thwarted these efforts until the late

1950s-60s, when Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta laid the foundation for the farmworkers movement. Strikes, marches, and a grape boycott (which gained national attention) resulted in the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) of the AFLCIO.

Despite the work of Chavez and Huerta, however, large inequities for immigrant farmworkers exist to this day. An estimated 700,000 agricultural workers work in California's fields and livestock facilities. Half are employed in the San Joaquin Valley of Central California.<sup>50</sup> These laborers are treated differently under US law: they are excluded from the protection designed to provide minimal standards of employment and collective bargaining rights for all other American workers. They are exempt from laws that require overtime payments, and most farms with fewer than 11 employees are exempt from protections under the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA). American children under the age of 14 may not work in any industry. Yet in agriculture the minimum age for employment is 12.

Some call the Central California Valley “the Other California,” recognizing its vast differences from wealthier regions of the state. Its youth population is approximately 40 percent Latino and 43 percent white; projections suggest that by 2040 Latinos will be the overwhelming majority — 59 percent in the Central Valley.<sup>51</sup> With the base of political power being in Southern California and the Bay Area, the concerns of the valley have been overlooked. A recent study of philanthropic activity in the valley found that it is significantly underserved by institutions that could improve the region. Statewide, grants averaged \$3 million per

100,000 people, but in the valley, grants averaged \$1.2 million.<sup>52</sup> And the valley’s poorest counties have a striking absence of organizations serving young people.

The valley contains 10 of the 12 counties with the highest unemployment rate in the state and many of its poorest counties. In 2000, every county in the San Joaquin Valley had a higher percentage of children who received free and reduced-price lunches than the state average — one indication that a large percentage of families are poor.

## Did you know . . .

**Agricultural workers are at significantly higher risk for chronic illness, such as heart disease, stroke, asthma, and diabetes. Unhealthy diets are seen as a major contributor to these conditions, as 81 percent of men and 76 percent of women have been found to have unhealthful body weights.<sup>53</sup>**

## SNAPSHOT: Planada, California

A good example of a pocket of poverty is Planada, California. In the heart of the San Joaquin Valley, the world’s most productive agricultural area, Planada is one of the poorest communities; its residents have an annual per-capita income of just over \$5,000. Seasonal workers live in more than two-thirds of the homes and are the poorest of the poor families there. Half of the town’s population of 3,531 people is younger than 17, and half of these children live in poverty. Three-fourths speak Spanish at home, and 20 percent are not fluent in English.

Planada is an example of a community rich in culture but lacking many of the basic institutions found in more prosperous areas. The town is not incorporated, has no mayor or city hall, no hospital, no public library, no philanthropic foundation, and few businesses. Although there is an elementary school and will soon be a middle school, it has no high school, and young people have few recreational alternatives to sports.

In recent years, Planada’s Community Development Corporation (CDC), one of a handful of local nonprofit organizations, helped to develop a strategic plan for the community with the hope of becoming an Enterprise Community (a government program that provides assistance to help poor communities develop economically). Although the application was unsuccessful, the CDC has continued its efforts “to map the assets” of Planada and engage the whole community in improving its physical, health, economic, and organizational capacity.

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Nathaniel Pinto:

## Community Service Provides a Purpose

**Nathaniel Pinto lives in Huerfano, New Mexico, an isolated Navajo village miles from a post office, library, and stores, and two hours from his high school. He lives with his mother and two younger sisters. His birth father committed suicide when he was very young, and although his mother remarried, and Nathaniel refers to his stepfather as “Dad,” he has never considered him a real father figure. His life has been shaped, in large part, by the caring leaders of his Chapter, the local governing unit on the Navajo reservation. As he enters his senior year, Nathaniel reflects on the people and opportunities that have enabled him to turn his life around.**

There are a bunch of really good things about this place. It's quiet. Sooooo quiet. You can leave your dog outside and ride your bike. There aren't many murders around here. You feel very free out here on the reservation. But people around here drink a lot. That's the bad part. And there's a lot of fighting that goes on at night. You can always hear people yelling and screaming and banging in the middle of the night when you are trying to go to sleep. Sometimes the fighting is unbearable. You can't fall asleep.



Nathaniel Pinto

I live right over here in one of these houses. My two little sisters are in the Community Action for Children and Youth [CACY] Program, which provides after-school activities for kids. They do art projects, and they play games. I used to work here at the Chapter House, with the kids in the CACY Program. I also have two brothers, but I don't really get along with them. One is 18. He's in jail. He's done some bad stuff, but he's in there now because he didn't obey his probation officer. He'll be in for a few more months. My other brother is 22. He just got out, too, for stealing a car. My dad is also in jail for auto theft and for drinking and wrecking the car that he stole.



Photo by Bob Winsett

So my mom and I are going through bad financial problems. She recently got her knee operated on, so she stays at home. They won't let her work. My mom gets financial assistance from the Chapter. I live with my mom and two sisters, but for the past two months, I haven't stayed with them. I dunno — I just had to get out of here. It's all the stress of what my dad is doing, what my brothers are doing, and what my dad put my mom through. I just can't handle being around any of them. I've realized that they are not very good for me. So I sometimes stay with my Nelly (my dad's mom) or with my uncle. I just stay wherever I can. I am so angry with my dad. I'm so mad that I don't even want to talk

with him or see him again. He told me that he would stop drinking and I believed him. He obviously never did, and the next thing I know, he's in jail.

People around here drink because they are depressed or something. They just want to lose their mind or something. I used to drink, but I stopped. I was drinking with my uncle, and he cracked up a car by going 95 mph when I was in the car. My brother went through the windshield, and I also got hurt.

This is what got me to volunteer with the fire department. They had a career thing going on, and one of the guys told me about it and I decided to check it out. I ended up doing it and it's changed my life all the way around. I went from being a bad little boy to a very good boy. I've gotten to go to places like Colorado to train and stuff. I don't drive the truck, but I ride on it. I can't believe the stuff that I see — the fires and the accidents. It's so exciting, and it feels so good to help. I now have a nice personality. I'm completely changed. I'm nice to people, and they are nice to me. I can open up, and that feels really good. I also help the younger kids around here.

My uncle and aunt (not blood relatives) work at this Chapter House. Danny is the Chapter coordinator. He's the one who got me through what I was going through. He's a really good guy. He's like a second dad to me. He forces me to do stuff that I don't want to do — like homework. He's real smart like that — he's real smart. He's pretty cool to hang out with too. People here think he's superior, but he's just cool. His wife is cool, too. She's like my second mom. After school, I usually come to this Chapter House. I really treat this place like home, and the people around here are my family. They also treat me the way that I've always wanted to be treated.

## Did you know . . .

**During 1995-97, 22.2 percent of American Indian households were hungry or on the edge of hunger. This is more than two times the number in the overall US population.** <sup>54</sup>

**Also, in a survey of 48 tribes, only 39 percent of rural households had telephones, 9 percent had personal computers, 8 percent had Internet access, 12 percent lacked electricity, and 23 percent lacked gas service.** <sup>55</sup>

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## Focus on the

# Navajo Reservation



A home on the Navajo  
Reservation, New Mexico

Photo by Bob Winsett

The Navajo Nation is the biggest American Indian reservation in the United States — larger in area than West Virginia — with a 2000 population of 173,600 people, a 21 percent increase since 1990.<sup>56</sup> Spanning many centuries, its history is filled with social and racial oppression, annihilation, and cultural destruction. After years of fighting over land and countless negotiations and treaties with the US government, the Navajo Nation was formed in 1863 after losing a military campaign to the United States that was led by Kit Carson. In 1864, more than 9,000 Navajos were forced to take what came to be known as “the Long Walk” — 300 miles from Arizona to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, where they were confined until 1868, when the military met with Navajo leaders and offered a treaty: the US would set apart land to allow the 7,000 surviving Navajos to return home. Additions have since been made to the original land to form today’s reservation.

Other provisions of the treaty have never been carried out. For example, in exchange for the

lands forfeited by the Navajos, the government agreed to care for the people, their health, welfare, and education. Originally a school and a teacher were to be provided for every 30 Navajo students. Instead, the United States imposed damaging policies on the Navajo, such as boarding schools, which required most children to be placed, sometimes forcibly, in schools often hours away where they were not allowed to speak their native language, resulting eventually in cultural annihilation.

Isolation remains a big challenge on the reservation. In 1999, only 30 percent of Navajo homes had telephones,<sup>57</sup> and even fewer had computers and Internet access. In addition, schools are often far from home, making two-hour bus rides common for many children. Social service agencies and youth organizations are often absent in these remote areas, and those that do exist often attract only those children who live close to the center. With little public transportation, attending after-school programs remains a challenge for many children.

## SNAPSHOT: McKinley County, New Mexico

These statistics depict a typical county on the Navajo Reservation.

2000 population	74,800 (75% American Indian)
Children 0-17 living in poverty (1999)	42.6%
High school graduates (over 25 years old)	approximately 24%
College graduates (over 25 years old)	approximately 5%
Median household income (1997)	\$21,681
% births to single mothers (1999)	67%
% enrolled in Medicaid (1999)	26%
Source: US Census Bureau, State and County Quickfacts, 2000.	

### Did you know . . .

A great effort is now being made by many tribes to teach children their language and culture so its continuity can remain intact. According to Lucille Yellowman, the coordinator of the Community Action for Children and Youth in Nenahnezad, New Mexico, "The entire foundation of our children's program is Navajo culture. At this center, we teach the children their clans, their directions, the four sacred mountains, their colors and numbers in Navajo. If they don't learn this here, they probably would never learn it at home."

***"It's interesting being American Indian. We think and feel the same as everyone else, we just may do things differently. We have sweat lodges and prayer meetings and we have pow-wows. I don't think of myself as being different. We are all people. I think that one of the most important things about preserving my culture is making others understand it. I like telling people I meet about my culture and how I grew up. It's very different for most of them, but then more people will understand the differences and what it's like to be American Indian."***

— Tyson Manning, 19 years old, Shoshone Tribe,  
Duck Valley Reservation, Nevada

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Hope Grigsby:

## The Power of Activism

**Hope Grigsby is a 16-year-old self-proclaimed activist. Her isolated community of Lotts Creek is nestled in the mountains of Knott County, Kentucky, miles from the nearest store or business. Through the efforts of a caring teacher, the students of Cordia School, the only small community school remaining, learned that they have a voice that can be used to create change in their community. This confidence empowered a group of young people, who see all too often the hopelessness caused by decades of poverty and despair, to take action. Hope's story speaks to the power of offering young people opportunities that enable them to express themselves and to realize that they can play a role in moving their generation out of the shadows of the past.**

I am proud to be an activist. I started becoming involved in the number 4 coal issue when I was 15 years old. A man from the Kentuckians for the Commonwealth came to our school, trying to get things going up in Kelly Fork. He was trying to stop a permit, which gave the Diamond Mae Coal Company authority to mine Kelly Fork. I was aware of the water issue but never thought that, as a kid, I could do much about it. Finding out that I had a voice and that I could make a difference gave me a whole new way to view my life.

Kelly Fork is right above my house, and I have lots of friends who live there. Since the Diamond Mae Coal Company came in to mine Kelly Fork, bad things have been happening to our entire community. The company came in with no concern about the effect on people's lives. I became an activist because I see and smell our water and because I know that we can't drink this water. Oh gosh, on any given day we can turn on our faucets and sometimes the water is crystal clear. Other days it looks gray and dingy, and other days there is so much oil in it that it's completely purple or even black. Because of the mining, our water tables have shifted. We used to have white sulfur and now we have red sulfur. It smells like rotten eggs — it's really, really nasty. It's so foul that when we turn on our faucets, we often have to leave the room. The coal company doesn't care that we can't drink our water or even bathe in our water. They don't have to look at it, or smell it or drink it. They don't have to drive long distances just to buy bottled water. After all, isn't water supposed to be free and available to all people? Just because we are poor and from the mountains, aren't we entitled to clean water? I know that mining puts a lot of people to work in our area and it is our biggest industry — but can't the coal companies have some consideration for the people who live on or near the mountain?

I was disturbed when I first heard about the number 4 coal issue, and I got in my head that maybe me and my friends could make a difference. With help from one of my teachers, we organized a protest and got a bus to take us to Frankfort to fight this battle. I'm an outspoken girl, and I never really knew what a powerful voice I had. We came to Frankfort prepared with signs, chants and bottles of dirty water that we got from our own faucets. We were determined to put water back on Kelly Fork. When we arrived in Frankfort, we didn't know what to expect. There were news people all over the place. I thought, "O my gosh," I just wanted to crawl back on that bus. I was so nervous. I didn't crawl back because everyone was looking to me as their leader. We started chanting, "If you mine the number 4, Kelly Fork will be no more. Shut the door on number 4. Shut the door on number 4." We got out our signs and banners. I got out my jar of water that looked like there was three inches of oil in it. We were stomping and chanting.



Hope Grigsby

Photo by Bob Winsett

Finally a man who worked for the Department of Surface Mining invited us in. He told us that there was not much that could be done — that the mining of Kelly Fork would continue. Several of my friends started screaming. I became very upset. I felt like my chest was caving in. I took a few deep breaths and asked again if he would hold the permit and help us. He told us that he was sorry, that he couldn't do that. We were so upset because it was clear that none of them really cared about us. We were teens and were trying desperately to help our community. Yet even our government would not help — even they didn't care. In the end, the Diamond Mae Coal Company promised that they would provide money to pipe city water into Kelly Fork. Although we couldn't stop the mining, we felt a victory, knowing that at least we would get clean water. The sad thing about this is that after one year, we still don't have our water. I think that they just wanted to appease us. The coal company obviously did not live up to their word.

Although we still have undrinkable water, something really good came out of all this. As kids, we learned that we could work

together as a unified force to make change. I've realized that you don't have to be an adult to be an activist and to make a difference. You can be just one voice and your one little voice can make a big difference. Forty kids and twelve adults went to Frankfort to fight for something that we deeply believed was right. And we will have that day to remember for the rest of our lives.

## Did you know. . .

**In Letcher County, Kentucky, an estimated 3,000 homes still use an antiquated system of discharging raw waste products into rivers and creeks. <sup>58</sup>**

# A Jewel in the Mountains: One Community School

In a decade of educational reform in Kentucky, the Cordia School, where Hope Grigsby is a student, stands as testimony to the benefits of maintaining small community schools.

The school was started in 1933 in the home of Alice Stone, who returned to Lotts Creek after studying in Ohio. Bringing with her a solid group of financial supporters, Stone raised the funds for the first school building in the 1940s. “From the beginning, this was truly a community school, and the school gave everyone a great reason to work together. The community donated the logs for our first building, and everyone helped in the construction,” said Alice Whittaker, Stone’s niece and the school’s current principal.

For many years, the school prospered. But in the early 1990s, the state approached Stone and gave her the choice of consolidating the school or raising private funds to build a new one to replace the original structure, which was in disrepair. Stone and Whittaker began a massive drive to raise the money for a modern building. With the help of the community and outside supporters, the building was completed in 1996 and is now a symbol of hope and community pride.

With family incomes so low that more than 72 percent of the children qualify for free and reduced-price school lunches, Cordia exemplifies the benefits of a small school. In a county where only about 25 percent of all people over 25 are high school graduates,<sup>59</sup> nearly 100 percent of the seniors attending Cordia graduated in 2001.

Many of the teachers are themselves Cordia graduates, and the school is one of the biggest employers in the area. As we learned from Hope, this school offers some special opportunities because the teachers are so involved in all aspects of the children’s lives and provide academic support and personal attention both in and out of

the classroom. As a result, there are few discipline problems and, according to Whittaker, *“the kids generally turn out good. Many even go on to graduate school and are being trained in medicine, nursing, physical therapy — all professions that are desperately needed in this region. And many of them do return to the area.”*

## The Loss of a Sense of Place

In addition to the negative effects on students, the loss of the community school in rural areas can be equated with the loss of a sense of community. According to one activist, Michael Tierney, from Big Ugly Creek, West Virginia, *“There is something very powerful about the sense of place in rural communities that helps them transcend the challenges of poor infrastructure and few resources. The context of roots and an unquestionable commitment to neighbors and kin allows people to build their own informal means of support, whether it be responding to personal or community crisis, or the long term watchfulness that helps children grow up. When schools are ripped out of the community in the name of efficiency, there is literally no public place to serve as the crossroads for those individual and family efforts. The loss of a school literally means the loss of any sense of public, civic community.”*

***“The distrust of the big schools within poor communities is profound. The kids experience long bus rides to and from school, the school environment is depersonalized and intimidating, and the cultures between the rich and poor kids are very different.”***

— Ronald Eller, Appalachian historian  
and former director of the Appalachian Center,  
University of Kentucky

Cordia Community School, Lotts Creek, Kentucky

Photo by Bob Winsett



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Shaneesa Mills:

## The Cry for Help on the Reservation

**Shaneesa (Pipper) Mills is a 14-year-old 9th grader from Farmington, New Mexico. Although she does not live on the Navajo Reservation, she is keenly aware of its high incidence of alcoholism and is committed to helping the young people who suffer from the harsh life of being children of alcoholics. After working at a summer program for children and young teens on the reservation, she saw first-hand the emotional toll this takes on the children. She decided to try to help by starting an Alateen program. In addition to this work, Pipper holds the distinction of being the first alternate to Miss Northern Navajo Teen, a title that takes her across the northern part of the reservation to represent her peers. In addition, she recently won the title of the Fourth of July Pow-Wow Princess in Port Duchane, Utah.**

I came here to start an Alateen program because so many kids have parents who abuse alcohol. *Actually, most of the kids.* They need somewhere to go to talk about this. All the drinking around here — it's really hurting the kids. A little girl yesterday told me that her daddy was drunk and he abused her. You know, he raped her. I was so hurt for her and didn't know what to say. I asked her if her mom knew. She said that she knew, but that her parents are divorced. She's only 10. There's no one here to talk to about stuff like this. She needed to talk and I was there, but I didn't know what to do for her. I just felt so badly. Another little girl told me that every member of her family drinks and she



Pipper Mills

Photo by Bob Winsett

hates it because it's really abusive in her house — the fighting and all that. I just think that if there is a place to go to talk about it and share problems, that this would be a good thing.

So I got in touch with the state Alateen office in Albuquerque and worked out a weekly support group that will begin this fall. I know that kids will come. They all start to drink here at such a young age because they see so much of this all around them. They see their parents and grandparents doing it, they think it's okay for them to do too. People around here drink to get rid of their problems. A lot of Navajo kids are very shy and they won't speak up for themselves — even if they have something important to say. The reservation is like that too, it's part of the culture. But I can tell you one thing — there are so many hurting kids around here.

## ALCOHOLISM: A Chronic Issue for American Indians

As we've heard from several American Indian youth, alcohol is a chronic problem on the reservations. In fact, its roots go back more than 500 years, to the initial contacts made by the American Indians with the European settlers in North America. The European invasion brought enormous stress to the native people, who had lived quietly for thousands of years. Early accounts are full of references to how the Europeans created a strong demand for alcohol by using it as a medium of trade, often exchanging it for animal skins. Since literature has found no oral recollections of alcohol use in nonceremonial settings before the Europeans arrived, this period of history may have seen the introduction of alcohol into the native population. The years of American Indian oppression, racism, and genocide might also have strongly contributed to a culture that includes alcohol.

Research confirms that American Indians have suffered not only the stigma of alcoholism, but also the damaging impact of alcohol-related problems. Compared with the general US population, American Indians are at high risk for problems caused by alcohol abuse. An analysis of 1991-93 data from the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse shows that American Indians have the highest prevalence of illicit drug and alcohol abuse (19.8 percent age 12 and older) of the 12 racial and ethnic subgroups studied in the survey, and a significantly higher prevalence than the general population (12 percent). This higher incidence is also seen in the data for hospital discharges. In 1997, the rate for discharges with a first-listed diagnosis of alcoholism was 1.6 times higher for the Indian Health Service (IHS) and Tribal Hospitals than for general short-stay hospitals.<sup>60</sup> This might explain why alcohol-related fatal automobile accidents are three times more prevalent in the American Indian population as in the general population, and alcohol-related suicide is 1.4 times as prevalent. According to the IHS records, the age-adjusted alcohol-related death rate in 1992 was 5.6 times higher among the American Indian population than the US general population, and chronic liver disease and cirrhosis were 3.9 times greater.<sup>61</sup>

***“I really wish that my dad would stop drinking, and sometimes I ask him to just stop and he says he will stop, but he doesn't. It gets me so mad. I've seen what it can do to people and I'll never drink. In my dad's case, he doesn't have a home or a car or anything. People on the reservation probably drink because there is nothing else to do. Kids here drink, and they smoke weed too”***

— Rene, 14 years old,  
Navajo Reservation

### Did you know . . .

**American Indian youth were 3.5 times more likely to have tried marijuana, 5.8 times more likely to have tried stimulants, and 8.3 times more likely to have tried heroin than were young people in a nationwide sample.<sup>62</sup>**

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## The Voice of Clifton:

# The Power Within

**Clifton Sutton is a high school senior from Duncan, Mississippi, who is thriving despite living in an isolated, poverty-stricken rural community with a broken family. His father died when he was young, and his disabled mother recently moved to Memphis, leaving Clifton and his sisters with various aunts. Under the positive influence of adult mentors and an incredible vision and personal commitment, Clifton has become a community leader. His story is one of resilience and demonstrates how young people, with the support of caring adults and constructive activities, can thrive in the face of adversity. We have seen that young people, given a voice and the ability to contribute, can become important community leaders. Whether or not Clifton ultimately settles in Duncan, his desire to address the problems in his community and articulate what's needed can be powerful forces in the process of community change.**

I was raised in Memphis and moved here when I was 10. I've lived here most of my life and have been attached to Duncan, but there are some things that I would like to see changed. For example, I get ready to play basketball, but you can die of a heat



Clifton Sutton

Photo by Kate Lapidés

stroke playing in this heat. It would be great to have an indoor gym here. Duncan has a lot of people who don't make much money. I'd like to see more money here. If we could bring say a Wal-Mart or other business, it would put people to work. That would draw more people here. You see, there are only about 500 people who live here. If we could have more funds, the town would expand. We go to a very small school. I'd like to see more in it, technology-wise. I'd like to see a sufficient computer lab, a sufficient biology and chemistry lab in the school. Right now

there are only two computers in each classroom and there are over 25 students. When it's time for research papers to be done, there are not enough computers for everyone. Most kids do not have computers at home so they should be able to get their work done at school. But all the classrooms are locked after school hours. We have to go to Delta State sometimes just to use a computer, and that's if we can get a ride because it's not close by!

The best thing at my school is the after-school tutoring program. I was a tutor and I helped other kids study for tests and stuff. Last year the test scores went up in my class. After-school programs are very important, but the funds for these are short. There seems to be enough money for our sports teams, and they are always very good but the academic program is not. It shouldn't be that way and I'd like this switched in reverse because I could be the best defensive tackle, but if I can't add two plus two, I'll never get a job.

I live with my aunt and uncle. My mom wanted to move to Memphis and it's my senior year and I want to finish up in my school. My roots are in Duncan, you know. I just want to put attention into Duncan, to see what needs to be changed here and what I can do to be of help. I've become very attached to Duncan. I wanted to stay here.

The greatest adult influence in my life has to be [pause] I would have to say, Mr. Casper Hall. He's the principal at the elementary school here. Whatever I do, he's right there to help me. He's like, "Listen son, I know you can do it, just do your best and I'm behind you." And this other guy, he's a minister, Reverend Jeffrey Butler. We go to church all the time and he's always encouraging me, giving me advice and he's like more of a personal friend. Basically Mr. Hall and Mr. Butler have been there for me since I've known them and I really respect that. They are dedicated to helping kids, not just me, but other kids. I can always talk to them.

I guess I was born with a lot of energy. I think it was God-given. Since I was little, I've always known what I want. I've always wanted to go to Memphis State and I will go. My drive is just built inside of me. If I want to do something in life, I don't feel that I've lived until I've done that certain thing. One of the keys

to energy is motivation. I have to stay determined — to stick to what I'm doing and work hard, you know. If you are motivated within yourself, you can't expect someone else to motivate you.

I see two different sides to life. My thing is, hey, I want the better things in life. I guess that other kids have a different perspective. I guess they say that they're enjoying themselves. I see kids around here doing lots of stuff. There are lots of kids my age who drink. The only thing it does is destroy your insides and I want to keep my insides. Smoking — there are kids my age who smoke. But they see something they enjoy and they want to do it. But the reason they do these things is because they have nothing else to do. Or maybe they have no one pushing them. And some of their parents are doing the same stuff. They have nobody backing them up. I think it's real important to have someone to back you up in life.

Another big problem we face is teen pregnancy. We have a lot of kids, young teenagers, having sex. They are not prepared to take care of their kids — they are just kids themselves. I think that what we need here is a way to bring the young people together for something positive. We need a youth center where kids could come after school. We need interesting things for them to do so that they can stay out of trouble. This could also draw adults together when they get involved with their kids. A youth center would have a great effect on this community.

I'm very interested in improving this community. We need so much here. We've had a few meetings with local politicians and county officials. Some people came here from out of town to see what needs to be changed here. I was on the program and I told them that I wanted to see Duncan grow. I also met another guy who can help me to write grants. I feel like I have some political support to get things done around here.

My advice to other kids around here is number one, to pray for change. Number two — you need to have a vision. If you don't have a vision, you don't know where you are going. Have a dream and follow it. And keep doing everything that you need to do so that you can make that dream come true. My dream is to — ah — to become financially stable and to be able to give back to Duncan. I could start something here that would help this place.



# SUMMING UP:

## Learning From the Young People

The interviews in Part Two show the effect of poverty on young lives. But they also show that caring adults and community organizations can give young people the opportunity to break out of poverty.

JoJo\*, the child of a substance-abusing father and disabled mother, credits the chess club with building his self-esteem, keeping him in school, and expanding his horizons. Vianna claims that her participation in the FFA helped her improve her grades and develop leadership skills. Although his stepfather's substance abuse and mother's poor health caused stress in his family, Nathaniel found caring adults at a community center run by his tribe, saying, *"I really treat this place like home, and the people around here are my family. They also treat me the way that I've always wanted to be treated."*

Unfortunately, most poor children in these communities have few options for constructive activities after school. As Isaac, living in Appalachia, puts it: "There is really nothing to do. This center is the only place around where kids can come after school.... Without positive activities, kids get into trouble. They go on top of the strip mines and have parties and get drunk." Tommiea, miles away in the rural South, echoes his views as she reflects on why "so many little girls around here get pregnant": *"I'm convinced it's because they have nothing else to do."*

Several of these young people, living in communities with poor schools, discuss the importance of a good education. As Clifton says, *"There seems to be enough money for*

*our sports teams, and they are always very good, but the academic program is not. I could be the best defensive tackle, but if I can't add two plus two, I'll never get a job."*

Finally, these young people demonstrate how giving back empowers them to improve their own lives. Nathaniel, after a serious car accident, joined the volunteer fire department and tells us, *"It's changed my life all the way around. I went from being a bad little boy to a very good boy."* Once young people experience themselves as change agents, they learn a lesson for life and become important community assets. Clifton, who worked as a tutor in his school, tells us: *"I'm very interested in improving the community. . . My dream is to become financially stable and to be able to give back to Duncan. I could start something here that would help this place."* And as Hope from rural Kentucky says, *"You can be just one voice and your one little voice can make a big difference."*

The ability of these young people to succeed is hopeful. Despite these stories, however, those of many others don't have a happy ending, often because the children lack the resources of their more fortunate peers. It's time to look at why, in a nation rich with resources, so many children remain deprived.