

SALS Journal

**A publication of the
Southern Appalachian Labor
School**

Issue 1 Volume 46

Summer 2024



Lean on SALS - The Slab Fork Story

*By Amanda Hammons, SALS Board Member
Chair, Raleigh County Prevention Coalition*

The family in my story is Donald and Rachel Pack of Slab Fork in Raleigh County. Slab Fork is the boyhood home of Bill Withers, known for his song, "Lean on Me".

The Packs met around 2010 and married the year after. To start a new life, they saved and purchased a home through relatives. In 2014 they owned their first piece of land in Slab Fork, Raleigh County. Rachel loved to bake, and they grew their own veggies in their yard.

A few years later in 2019 they faced some trouble as Donald was laid off from his landscaping job due to COVID cutbacks. The same year Rachel became ill and suffered a stroke. Then, their vehicle broke down. Trials increased as their roof began to leak. The leak filled the basement, leading to the electric and water company shutting off utilities. The family could not afford to make the repairs required so they struggled throughout 2020 to meet basic needs such as clean water, animal food, kerosene in the winter and cooking on an outside fire pit. "Through this we just tried to keep our heads up and not quit, all we had was each other," said Donald.

"Seemingly their family was not applicable for many assistance program requirements from everywhere that we knew and searched for help," said Rachel. I was working with a local nonprofit, Raleigh County Prevention Coalition, when I met the family in 2021. We searched together and utilized some sources. After searching for almost a year, I met Marcus Wilkes with SALS who was writing a grant to the Beckley Area Foundation to assist the underserved in rural areas of Raleigh County.

The grant was awarded!! And then, Jimmy Treadway, a VISTA volunteer, donated a trailer located in Oak Hill. Now we had to find the resources to have it moved to their land.

Sadly, the roof of their home had become beyond re-



Donated mobile home is delivered to replace the Pack's condemned house up in Slab Fork

pair with the extreme water damage and infestation of mold. I then met John David with Southern Appalachian Labor School who partnered BAF to offer just enough to possibly purchase a trailer. We looked for a trailer at the budget available for several months with no break. Just when the family was becoming discouraged, they were invited to share their story on the local TV station WVVA. In this story the Packs reminded everyone that "you should always check on your neighbors, see if they need a hand," said the Pack's. Even in the most troubling and strenuous times they thought to offer support to others! Rachel tells of the beautiful cookies she would make to carry next door and share. She told us about growing up asking the lady across the street for a cup of milk. They spoke of the connections we used to share inside cities and counties alike. Like magic, then came the donated trailer and the available funds were used to move it from Oak Hill to Slab Fork

Continued on page ten

Disaster Preparedness at SALS

by Marcus Wilkes, HUD Certified Coalfield Housing Counselor

By Marcus Wilkes, HUD Coalfield Housing Counselor

By now, most people are aware of the impact of changing weather patterns. A couple of generations ago, winter storms could bring a few feet of snow without the aid of snow-making equipment. Wildfires were very rare. Now the weather is increasingly warmer. Discussions center on, not if a natural disaster will happen, but when. Within six months of 2023 and 2024 there have been wildfires, floods, and tornados that require called state of emergencies throughout the state.

Residents in the SALS service area have called to seek support for food and housing. In 2023 SALS has distributed pallets of Meals Ready To Eat, pet food, and dry goods to residents living in our rural areas who might have to endure the challenges of a declared disaster. Once a month food resources through the Mountaineer Food Bank are distributed through two sites in Fayette County with support from dedicated volunteers like Barbara Painter, Artie Mullins, Jackie Coleman, Patty Webb, and mature workers who are tasked with housekeeping and clerical duties at different facilities.

On occasion, individuals have been provided temporary housing at locations in Beards Fork and Oak Hill. Some of these people are in recovery and have no other place to live. They are provided meals donated by Little Caesars Pizza and Sheetz. These foods are also delivered to people living in public housing, trailer parks, and low resource communities.

SALS is hard pressed to fill the needs of people who are victims of storm damage or live in houses that require mitigation efforts. Critical repairs are needed in this vast rural area because of the lack of contractors and workers. SALS' building contractor Vickie Smith is hard pressed to train enough workers from limited program opportunities that are available. A capable group of volunteers, Terry Black, Chase Vanover, Steve Fitzgerald, Hal Lawrence, and Jimmy Treadway have diligently organized efforts to cover internal and community assignments, even when the weather did not cooperate. Joe Webb fills a void both in administration and operations. The office staff at the Kincaid office works to keep clerical and administrative processing moving forward to maintain business operations.

When referrals are made to other helping agencies, qualification requirements generally discourage many low-income people because of the inability to produce items such as home ownership documents or types of insurance coverage. Also, delays in funding are problematic, as volunteer director John David constantly scours the grants and social programs landscape to find funding and other resources to help when people are in need. There is an exceptional amount of need but requirements to access the

resources often are a roadblock.

There are occasions when slum landlords leave tenants debilitated, since needed repairs and lack of a lease agreement limit protections from natural disasters. When the weather is wet, there is flooding. When the weather becomes dry there are wildfires. Wind damage can happen at anytime. SALS is willing to utilize any and all resources available to assist people in need. Investments made in solar energy can accommodate residents once fully engaged but disasters are a regular occurrence now. However, preparedness is the best option. Please help us acquire a generator, which will help during disasters. Other considerations include communications, emergency transportation, and planning for recovery. Much needs to be done! See: weather.gov/rlx/2024-WV-tornadoes



The above event is one of several throughout the year SALS offers to benefit families in need

The SALS Journal is published by the Southern Appalachian Labor School, a grassroots effort dedicated to social & environmental justice and workers rights. We welcome articles and submissions by our readers. Send to: Gary R. Zuckett, Editor, SALS Journal, POB 127 Kincaid, WV 25119. Phone 304-250-7627 www.sals.info United Assoc. of Labor Education LABOR DONATED

Volunteer Director's Report

By John David

SALS has experienced a tough year coupled with inspirational moments. Major initiatives were rejected as funds failed to flow into the rural non-incorporated coal camp communities and hollers that we serve. Low-income and disabled families, many with children left behind by the pandemic, were stranded in distress with hunger, inadequate housing, and education deficiencies.

There were a few positive developments. We received Community Facilities funds from USDA to do new roofs at the Historic Oak Hill School (HOHS) and the SALS Community Center in Beards Fork plus a Congressional Earmark to construct third floor apartments and an elevator at HOHS. In addition, over 300 volunteers came during the 2024. They worked on the two new Page houses. In addition, they did 15 repairs in the Upper Kanawha Valley thanks to the cooperation of the Kanawha County Commission, Kanawha County Schools, Chuck Smith, and many other generous donors. EDA, Truist, Pyles and Turner Foundation, ReBuilding Together, ACTIVE Southern West Virginia, Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation, Neighborhood Investment Program (NIP) and the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh in partnership with Summit Bank came out to help us also. The SALS Family, VISTAs, and volunteers were vital in making this all happen.

One high point occurred in April when Nina Han, Director of Program Activities at West Virginia University's new Kendrick Center contacted us about a visit to SALS in Beards Fork.

The Kendrick Center has a Fellow Program that identifies talented undergraduate students at West Virginia University, gives them a world-class education in ethics and economics, highlights opportunities the Mountain State has to offer, and incentivizes them to stay and contribute to the

State after graduation. Nina said "We identify with SALS's mission and would love for the Fellows to have a firsthand experience on what it's like on the ground of a long-standing nonprofit in West Virginia. She asked if anyone from our organization would be available to meet with the Fellows and discuss SALS's history, mission, and why organizations like SALS are essential to the future of West Virginia".

On Sunday morning, April 7, 2024, at 10 AM, a charter bus navigated the one lane road to the SALS Community Center in Beards Fork with 35 WVU students plus 5 faculty/staff for lunch, presentations, and a tour of Beards Fork.

It was a knock-out session as written by one student to us afterwards: "***I am a Kendrick Fellow and got to visit you in April. Thank you for your kindness and southern hospitality! The hospitality of West Virginians is one of many reasons I love this state! I have a dream to work in the nonprofit sector, so my visit really touched me.***

Thank you for all that you do for the community – it does not go unnoticed and I am making sure everyone knows about your mission as I share it widely. I saw the Lord's hand on SALS, and I thank you for serving with a heart not only for WV, but also for the Lord."

Thank you!!! Kenzie Nottingham, WVU, 2024

But time takes its toll. We lost VISTA Matt Vanover, Summer VISTA Alexandria Miller, Brenda Warrick, Bruce Boyens, Lee Balliet, Sid Yoho and other close friends among those we have served. One national loss was an early advocate for women coal miners, Betty Jean Hall, who went on to work for the U.S. Dept. of Labor. We are always reminded that doing good deeds is the perfect medicine for mood and memory.

As SALS enters its Golden Anniversary, we thank you for your loyalty and hope that you will continue to support us so we can continue to "Make a Difference" for those in need.



The Southern Appalachian Labor School had a highly successful NewRiver White-water rafting excursion and a river side lunch on a beautiful Saturday, June 29, 2024. The event, coordinated by SALS Advisory Board Member Joe Mario from Massachusetts, was a gift of appreciation to SALS supporters and staff provided by Adventures on the Gorge, a local outfitter. SALS Board Members Bolts Willis, Joe Mario, and Amanda Hammons joined the excursion. Shown is the entire SALS delegation with Joe Mario on the far right.

Doing too Many Things at Once

By Vickie Smith, Construction Manager

Summer is underway and many things need to be accomplished. We are always under the gun to complete requirements for grants. We only have a couple of people working on construction right now so this becomes very stressful to all. We all try to figure out the next best move so that we are remaining successful and meet our funders expectations.

As of yet, we have not been able to secure renewed YouthBuild funding. I am sure as with other issues we that this is also due to a certain witch. Personalities should never play a role in our professional duties. Most often this is not the case in state and local entities but creates a headache to those trying to serve the public since they cause more hardships for those who are struggling in this crazy world we live in.

We have managed about five rehabs so far in 2024 and now must focus on the new Coalfield Houses for a couple of months. Once we complete these, we will then try to complete one of the Beckley homes. All the homes we construct are affordable homes that most often provide people with the luxury of owning a home and building equity. The mortgage, insurance and taxes are usually cheaper than the local rents. Home ownership adds stability to the family and an enormous sense of pride, along with belonging to a community. It also stabilizes our community and gives homeowners a vested interest in their community. This is not a handout but a hand up.

We will have two houses ready this year for the lucky new homeowners. You can apply by calling our office 304.250.7627. The first unit has two bedrooms and the second one is three bedrooms.

Our food pantry is growing in usage as food security is becoming increasingly difficult. Our area in West Virginia has always had a poverty rate higher than surrounding areas. Drug and alcohol addiction are also issues. So the SALS organization has a tough endeavor as it is most often the local organization that has historically helped those in need. The client list grows as many needs grow.

FORWARD EVER

By Lisa Manley, Housing Specialist

Things have been busy for the past few months at the SALS Office in Kincaid.

For one thing, thanks to the USDA HPG (Housing Preservation Grant) SALS has repaired 15 homes for low-income families. Most of these home got a new roof but there were some HVACs installed so folks can stay warm in the winter and cooler in summer.



*Coalfield Housing Project in Page WV,
SALS is working to complete this new low income home
with help from our volunteers.*

Group Work Camp was in the Upper Kanawha Valley from June 30 – July 6, 2024. There were 110 volunteers here to do minor repairs on homes. For those of you who do not know about Group Workcamp:

Workcamps are intensive one-week trips that help people grow in Christian faith through service. Individuals and youth from around the country will spend one week in the community performing home-repair projects for elderly, low-income, Veteran, and disabled families. The work at each home will be done by five young people and at least one adult leader representing many Christian denominations. Both labor and materials are free to qualifying households.

SALS, Kanawha County Schools, Kanawha County Commission and ReBuilding Together are proud to be co-sponsors of the Group Work Camp program. Thanks to this joint effort, approximately 15 families had their houses painted, received porch/step repairs or wheelchair ramps.

SALS was awarded a grant with the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh for repairs on 7 homes. Some of these have been identified and hopefully they will qualify, and work can begin soon.

Finally, SALS has been awarded Emergency Food Shelter Program money which will help the food pantry. It comes at a really good time with school being on summer break and kids not getting breakfast and lunch at school.

Community Matters at Regina Apartments.

by Tylor Dent

It feels like yesterday I found myself at Regina Three Rivers Apartments, meeting Brenda Warrick for the first time. Brenda changed my life, and many others that I've encountered on our path together. She is missed truly every day, along with too many others we've lost in our community in the last couple years. Death is not our only loss though. Covid, disasters and storms across the state have taken so much from many.

Housing in West Virginia is hard to come by. This is caused by lack of credit, work barriers, low minimum wage, no transportation and no work opportunities. At Regina Three Rivers Apartments I'm now working as property manager and encountering those who have suffered so much. It's has been eye opening. Working with SALS and the Summer Program, there are so many in other communities suffering. We try our best to change as many lives as possible, but the job is never fully done. I strive to give our tenants the most comfortable and safe homes and environment as possible. We are one!

Through the loss, and all the weathering, SALS and Regina Three Rivers Apartments come together to thrive as a community. We're family oriented, peaceful, and coming together in the worst times to find beauty still, in all the madness.

Watching people come together to overcome the impossible, well it's truly a beautiful sight to see. If only there were more people who see the greater good and make a change. Individuals who know the importance of community. Those who realize that we aren't many, but we are all one. All together and one small step towards changing lives. That's what opportunity SALS works toward and offers our communities in Fayette County and the region. I'm thankful for the opportunity to volunteer and serve with other volunteers in our community.

A New Beginning

by Joe Webb, VISTA

Hi there! My name is Joe Webb, and I am thrilled to share with you the latest updates from SALS. As an AmeriCorps Volunteer in Service America (VISTA), I've been lucky enough to serve with SALS for a while now, and I'm excited to tell you about some of the great things happening here.

I coordinate our FM radio station 106.5 WAGE, and work with a team of incredible volunteers on various projects, including our monthly food bank and building repairs and upgrades. It's been a busy time for us, but we



are proud to be making a difference in our community.

We are currently working to install one of the biggest solar projects in Fayette County. Phase one of our solar project is already up and running at our Historic Oak Hill School, and we hope to start phase two shortly.

While this is an ambitious project, we are taking it step by step and are currently finishing some of the needed roofing repairs with the help of our friends at the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). We are grateful for their support, as well as the support of the donors who have helped us raise the money required for the 25% match needed for this Community Facilities grant.

We are also so excited to announce that our community building in Beards Fork is getting a new roof, thanks to another grant we received. We are also working to go Greener at our Beards Fork School and our Regina Three Rivers apartment complex in Gauley Bridge.

At SALS, we are always looking for ways to secure funding to continue our good work. We appreciate the support we receive from our local county commissions, city councils, small business owners, other non-profits, and individuals who help us maintain and continue our work.

Federal and state funding is also crucial to continue our community support framework. We were truly fortunate to have received congressional direct funding to assist in making the Historic Oak Hill School more accessible and to provide much-needed affordable housing in town.

Unfortunately, we got denied funding the state has available for food pantries without a true explanation. This makes allotments from the local cities, towns, and counties to our food programs extremely important to provide healthier food to a vulnerable population. Know you all are appreciated, and we are doing our best, as an organization, to provide food, services, and housing to folks!

This year, I had the pleasure of coordinating with Active Southern West Virginia (ASWV) again. They help increase physical activity and wellness in our area by hosting events that get people moving. Together, we installed bike racks at our Oak Hill and Beards Fork locations to improve our workspace through their wellness programs and mini grants. We also promote mental health and activity breaks during our workday to help alleviate stress and promote a safe and healthy workplace. In June, we were honored to be among the first organizations in the state to receive the Celebrating Healthy West Virginia award from the WV Division of Health Promotion and Chronic Disease in collaboration with ASWV.

We are always working on construction projects, including repairs for some folks keeping them in their homes, and finishing some affordable housing for purchase. We are working with the many volunteer groups here this summer and are excited to have the Humanitarian Experience (HXP) group with us from June until August as well as Group Workcamps in late June and early July. They assist our community by performing volunteer service projects like painting, building wheelchair ramps, and other much needed construction projects. Doing Good by Being Good is their motto.

We had an amazing experience hosting an AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Conservation Corps) team to work on a nature trail on the historic railroad bed in Beards Fork. We were blown away by the amount of work this group accomplished. Their work ethic and ability to overcome the many obstacles that occurred during their short-term stay with us were commendable. While here, they experienced some severe weather resulting in tornadoes in a rare area, and temperatures that ranged from in the seventies to in the thirties with snow. Seeing these groups come to the area and improve the lives of folks in many hollers that are very isolated is a gift to see, and renews my faith in humanity.

There is so much good work being done at SALS to help our region, but there is still a lot more to do. I hope this update finds you well and that you will continue to support our efforts. Please do not hesitate to contact us for transparency on anything that comes to mind. I will do my best to keep you in the know!

Building Beards Fork Trail

*by Sadie Murray,
NCCC (National Civilian Conservation Corps)*

Working in Beards Fork was my first-time setting foot in West Virginia. It was gorgeous. The entire drive up,



Over 100 volunteers with Group Work Camps, who completed 15 home repairs in the Upper Kanawha Valley, gather on July 5th for a closing celebration at the East Bank Middle School

through the mountains, only reinforced how beautiful and how unique this area was. And that set the tone for the rest of my experience on this project.

On the first day, Joe and Artie took me and my entire AmeriCorps National Civilian Conservation Corps team up to the historical company store to tell us about the history of Beards Fork and the coal mines. And after that, I was able to hear more about the community and its history from neighbors who would speak to us while we worked on the trail. And whenever we were on the trail, cutting into the mountains, following the old railway tracks, we were able to see the community of Beards Fork sprawled out below us.

Even in AmeriCorps, it's rare we get to work on a project that is connected with the history of an area as we did in Beards Fork.

In addition to our work on the trail, we were given the opportunity to help with the food pantry and help with an Easter Egg hunt for children. That's one of the most impactful parts of being a Team Leader with AmeriCorps for me – getting to connect with new people and communities, even as we travel across the country every month. And it was incredible to see how hard Joe, Artie and the other people at SALS worked every day. It reminded me of why I had joined AmeriCorps: the desire to be part of something bigger than myself.

On our way out, and on to our next project, the team stopped in front of our trail to take one last photo with Artie, reflecting on our time in West Virginia and the work we were able to do. I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity I had to work in Beards Fork, learning about the history and meeting people as warmhearted as Artie and Joe.

SALS Beards Fork Rail Trail

by Savanna Shao-Lin, AmeriCorps NCCC
(National Civilian Conservation Corps)

The Beards Fork Railroad Trail was a pleasure to have a hand in making. The land's natural beauty, and the passion SALS staff has for nature and their community, made me excited to begin the work. The task was daunting at first, walking the land where the trail should be, revealed how much there was to do. I wasn't sure if my small team of seven would be able to finish everything in three weeks.

We started work: moving trees, rocks, and roots every day. I love digging my hands into the dirt, hearing the river, looking at butterflies and deer while reshaping the earth to make it walkable. I never considered how much daily life is spent indoors, until my gap year joining and volunteering with AmeriCorps, where I now spend most of my day outdoors. Sightings I once considered rare, like frogs, turtles, fish, dolphins, sunrises, and shooting stars, are now things I see every day, just by being outside.

While in the forest all day, where trees dig deep into the mountainside, and hearing stories about the past and present from locals in Beards Fork, I started thinking about the idea of roots. How having a community, a

culture, a family, is important. Some kind of network of people who you care for, and who care for you.

We all need help sometimes, and the idea of not just taking, but having the chance to give to, protect, and connect with others is valuable. Deep roots are what help trees stay grounded, when big storms try pushing. Roots are what collect water and nutrients for trees to grow tall, flexible, and strong. People all need and deserve roots to live.

Being from California, and only ever having lived and traveled along the Pacific region, I thought I left all my roots behind when I started volunteering all the way across the country. All the places I've lived, things I've collected, memories I've made, and the people I love, were suddenly thousands of miles away.

I was wrong though. Roots don't stop growing when you're a kid, and they don't stop growing in adolescence, or young adulthood. I'm not sure about any stages past those, since I haven't reached them yet, but I'm sure roots don't stop growing then either. Much to my surprise, after living in each new city, town, or the holler I've volunteered in, I've built new support systems and new things to define myself by, along with the old things.

Roots grow with you, as you grow up. Your foundation will expand to encapsulate every version of who you are and where you belong. When I imagine Beards Fork, SALS, and the trail, I see it in a bubble, connected by strong to many other bubbles across the United States. I now see a home in all the people I've connected with, places I've been, and memories I've made. I'm honored to have temporarily been a part of so many unique communities across the states for these last 10 months. Beards Fork is special. It's old. There's coal in the dirt, and trees growing on the railroad tracks that trains use to pass through. You can hear running water from the river on the whole walk, and see insects crawling, moss growing up trees and rocks, violets where the bumblebees get their nectar, mushrooms growing in corners and roots, of course roots, under-neath everything.

Sometimes building a trail, it seems like nothing changes. It's only until a large passage of time that anyone would be able to see how much was accomplished. With the help of SALS staff, and their family members, my team was able to clean out and revitalize a community greenhouse, make instructional pamphlets and videos for future volunteers, and of course, finish 2.5 miles of trail.

Good luck to whoever volunteers next, have fun to whoever walks the trail, and thank you to SALS for hosting the AmeriCorps National Civilian Conservations Corps in 2024.



Much thanks to this AmeriCorps NYCC group that worked so hard on turning the old, overgrown rail right-of-way running up the Beards Fork Hollow into a cleared hiking trail that goes right by SALS Community Center.

Kincaid Office News

by Ruth Lanham, Administrative Executive

Hello, this is Ruth at the SALS Office in Kincaid, which is located between our Historic Oak Hill School location and our Beards Fork community center.

We are still plugging along with submitting grant proposals. We are waiting for replies from potential funders. There are lots and lots of things going on here at SALS. I haven't been able to walk very well recently, so I am working from home three days a week unless there is something pressing and then I work from the office. Some of us are having problems with our health but we are pushing on the best we can. I work at the office normally two days a week. There are several changes happening in our projects.

We receive calls from community members daily asking for help with a large variety of things. We have several people needing ramps so they can go back and forth to the doctor. Roofs seem to be a major problem for many homeowners in our area. The storms have lately damaged a lot of roofs. Most of these houses were built in the 40s and 50s and the roofs are old and need to be replaced. Unfortunately, we regret that we can't help everyone who calls needing help.

We are still in need of vehicles so that we can replace some of our very old ones with high mileage. We also are in desperate need of a pickup truck. People call needing refrigerators, washers, dryers, and stoves. If you would like to donate to SALS you can call our office at 304.250.7627 or drop by our office on Route 61 in Kincaid. We can offer West Virginia Tax Credits and/or a Federal Charitable gift deduction for donations.

Thank you in advance for your kindness to the needy members of our community.

Tracking Money Matters

by Tracy Patrick

There's a lot to do at the SALS office these days. I've been continuing my education with the accountants to reconcile SALS bank accounts and other bookkeeping tasks. I've also been organizing items for the food pantry and Blessing Boxes for the low-income residents of our community.

I am taking donations and organizing volunteers for monthly yard and hot dog sales for funding the food pantries. In addition, I am organizing volunteers to send homeowner acceptance letters and create spreadsheets for Group Workcamp's home repair projects and maintaining a spreadsheet with demographics of the low-income families that we serve.



Deborah reads to kids while they eat a free summer lunch

Being VISTA & Mature Worker

by Deborah Heltman

My work with SALS started about two years ago in February and I needed a place to live. I applied for and got in at SALS Regina Three Rivers Apartments,

I had only lived here for a couple of months when the manager, Tylor, told me about a summer program sponsored by AmeriCorps VISTA at SALS called Read and Feed. Its a program that provides lunches for school age children in low-income families when school is out.

I jumped on board and began preparing lunches for these kids. We had additional staff who would deliver the lunches to low-income apartments and read stories to the children. What a blessing to do this for these families. It was a sad moment when summer came to an end.

Last summer I was excited to participate again. For me, though, along came the big "C" - Cancer! I was diagnosed with Stage 3 Breast Cancer. So when the program began, every morning at 5:30 a.m., I would drive to the Cancer Center in Charleston to take my radiation treatment and then go to Beards Fork to work. I was excited to be there every day without missing, and then delivering lunches and reading stories to the kids.

I was once again hoping to be a Summer VISTA this summer and work with the kids. However, federal funding wasn't granted for the program this year, so I switched to the SALS Mature Workers Program and now am hopefully awaiting a long-term VISTA position.

Southern Appalachian Labor School, John David, and everyone I worked with and met along the way have left me with fond memories that will always be with me.

Thankful Steve

by Steve Fitzgerald

I started volunteering for the Southern Appalachian Labor School (SALS) on 5-1-22. At first, I volunteered for the food bank and feeding the volunteers. Then last summer I helped with cooking meals for the volunteers. Then, I did the driving for the volunteers as they traveled to the job sites. I have been previously involved in Community Service doing trash pickups, and now, working on the SALS vehicles to keep them running.

I am so glad that I am now a part of the SALS family and working this summer with the latest groups of volunteers. I have met many new people and hope to meet many more. SALS does much needed service of home repair for the elderly, disabled, and low-income citizens of West Virginia.

Keeping a Positive Spirit Alive

by Holly Manley

Hi, I'm Holly. I started out as a member of Youth-Build, then I became a Summer VISTA, and now I am year round VISTA. Some of the things I do include organizing items for the food pantry and working on various grants including grants for The Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation and United Way of Southern West Virginia.

It is nice when I get to collaborate with other VISTAs on various projects and I enjoy my time here at SALS. It is a great learning experience. I'm enjoying meeting some of the great volunteers coming in this summer to do home repairs, and I can't wait to see what the rest of this year will bring!

Hope is What We Do

by Barbara Painter

I have moved out of the annex building and back into my old office in the Historic Oak Hill School. It feels like a homecoming! The best thing is that now our clients can find me for the services that they need.

I have been working with the SNAP Stretch program to obtain information on allowing folks that receive SNAP to extend their benefits for extra produce from Summer Farmers Markets. I will share it as soon as it comes in.

I also have spoken with the Governor's Office about two grants that we applied for and were disqualified.

These grants were very much needed to assist us in purchasing healthy and nutritious food to distribute to our clients including our summer programs next year. No answers have been provided as to why we weren't approved.

Two of our Mature Workers at the Historic Oak Hill School ended their training this past spring. We will miss Robert Nelson and Donna Leftwich. They have been a great help with the food pantry, keeping the school tidy and clerical tasks. We'll continue to recruit older workers for this program. We recently welcomed Judy Snead and William Tuck. At the SALS Community Center in Beards Fork, we welcome back William Austin and Thomas Crowder to join Vernon Coles. At the SALS Regina Apartment in Gauley Bridge, we are grateful to have Debbie Heltman.

I have enjoyed helping the tenants at the Heritage House in Raleigh County with the services and especially during Christmas with them! There are so many different decorating ideas and you never knew how the Common Room was going to look when you walked in and each door is decorated nicely. The halls were decorated festive.

It seems like this past winter was especially difficult for many families. We would sometimes go several days with no calls for the Dollar Energy Fund to assist with utility bills. But then, it seemed that all utilities sent disconnect notices on the same day and we took a lot of applications in one afternoon. Sorry to say that the Dollar Energy Fund depletes funds for Mountaineer Gas and AEP very quickly.

Then we work on the food pantries. That involves working with the Mountaineer Food Bank and ordering foods to distribute the first Friday of each month at our Historic Oak Hill School center, and the following Monday afternoon at the SALS Community Center in Beards Fork. We try to provide healthy and nutritious food. Working with the clients is nice, since you get to work with so many different people from different walks of life. As food costs increase and SNAP was decreased, we have more clientele than usual. We did apply for new software to assist on food days which could have made the wait shorter for our clients but was turned down.





The wheels come off and the foundation blocks are set under the Packs donated mobile home

Lean on SALS, continued from Page One

As I pondered on this story, I realized it had been years since I'd heard of this type of neighborly love and compassion. I remember going right next door for holidays and just to visit on spring days.

Today I see more struggle through independence in our communities, everyone fending for themselves and being hard pressed to do so. It seems that through the changing times of our economy and the struggles of COVID we have forgotten what made us so strong to begin with. Not our jobs, our houses or our money, it was our people. A friend with a smile when we were down, a hand when we struggled, a word of positivity when all seemed bleak. Family that shows up when needed and calls to check on you every now and then. Neighbors that let you know you are far from alone.

Today the Pack family are so much closer to their goal of a livable home on their land. They have some steps left to take but they won't be taking them alone. They have found a church family with Lester Baptist, friends (they just met) that came from all over to offer supplies, and neighbors like you and I that offer them encouragement to keep living and loving.

From this family I learned that without each other life is hard, fast, and surface level to say the least. Somehow, we have lost touch with the connection to others that keeps us whole, united, and strong! Somehow, we have forgotten about our neighbors. When we don't have others to count on, life catches up with you and you can struggle in many more ways than one.

I hope that through one outreached hand, knock on a door and one phone call at a time we can remember what made us so strong and carry on for years to come.

2024 SALS Housing Rehab Program Winding Down

*by Steve Keenan skeenan@register-herald.com
adapted from Beckley Register Herald, Aug 12, 2024*

As another productive, necessary summer of rehabilitating homes in the region winds down, the Southern Appalachian Labor School is peering into the future to see how those efforts will continue to take shape.

A contingent of more than 100 volunteers completed a week's stay in July in the Upper Kanawha Valley area as part of a long-running program via SALS that helps rehabilitate aging homes for residents in southern West Virginia. The overall housing volunteer program coordinated by the Fayette County-based SALS has positively impacted around 20,000 people in its decades of operation, estimates Dr. John David, the volunteer SALS director.

This summer has included volunteers from organizations such as Humanitarian XP and Group Workcamps bringing volunteers into West Virginia.

During the Fourth of July week, 113 volunteers from Group Workcamps completed 15 housing projects, according to John David. After ending their work and before heading back to their home bases, the volunteers and their leaders were involved in a closing ceremony with residents and SALS staff at East Bank Middle School. David said the project included collaboration with ReBuilding Together, Kanawha County Commission, Kanawha County Schools and area donors. Much of that work occurred in Kanawha County since the Kanawha County Commission was a funding source.

In another project, 20 volunteers, including two leaders and two parents, from Humanitarian XP had a closing dinner in early July with SALS staff and received recognition for their work in substantially completing two new homes in Page at the site of the former local African American school.

It wasn't all work, though. The volunteers visited the Beckley Exhibition Mine, ACE Adventure Resort and Cafe 110 for a concert, in addition to an initial raft trip with Adventures on the Gorge, David said.

Their work projects included wheelchair ramps, weatherizations and the contributions to the new homes for low-income families in Page.

The staff is "being stretched to the limit" in responding to a widespread need, David said, so the volunteer assistance is appreciated.

"I did a calculation by adding up all the teams (that have come in the past), and I got 20,000 ... an amazing number. Even when we were getting 300 or 400 a year, it really added up.

Continued on Page 12

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Winding Down, continued from page 10

“This year, we’ll have 250 volunteers who will come in from out-of-state, primarily college and faith-based organizations, and that’s low. I think the pandemic impacted things a little bit, and now it’s building back up again.” How many families/residences have been served over the years? “We have repaired over 1,000 homes.”

Rehabilitation, which depends on the largesse of funders, means rebuilding part of a house, he noted. It could mean, for example, a roof or a handicap ramp being included. “And, then, we have built from scratch about 30 new homes for low-income people.” Those were in locales such as Oak Hill and Page.

SALS got its start in the mid-1970s at West Virginia Tech in Montgomery as the Center for Labor Education, before becoming SALS in 1981, according to David.

Among the individuals with whom he worked at the time was his future wife, Jan Young, who helped oversee a program which recruited people in the community to enroll in college and obtain a degree. AmeriCorps and VISTA were later affiliated with the program. “Some people who are still around with us today started out as VISTAs.”

Besides its scheduled rehabilitation services, in which individuals must own their own homes, SALS will also occasionally provide impromptu services. On this past West Virginia Day, for example, a small crew was dispatched to help fix a portion of a woman’s porch in Oak Hill that made a wheelchair ramp possible. “We replaced some boards, and we got it workable by noon, and we didn’t ask any questions.”

David said there are “many elderly, disabled members of the population” that have been affected by their military service or work in the mines or other factors who are “still living, in my opinion, in houses that are not habitable.”

“With the ebbs and the flows and the ways of grant money, and inflationary rates that we’re experiencing right now, they (SALS) are surviving quite well,” Timothy Scites, the general partner for Bookkeeping and Tax Solutions, LP, based in Charleston, said recently as he and members of an audit team were onsite at the SALS office.

“Don’t get me wrong, we’re not sitting fat and sassy, but we’re still supplying the needs of the Veteran housing programs that you have going on, the low-income rental housing programs that you have going on, the housing construction and reconstruction that a lot of your volunteers are doing right now.

“Despite all the coming and going that we have going on economically, SALS has been doing this for 45 years-plus. And they’re not going anywhere anytime soon. They may want to diversify some things that they do, or diversify some ways that they do things, but they’re not going anywhere.”

“I like the Veterans homes and Veterans home reconstruction program that they have going on (through the Housing Assistance Council via Home Depot). And, I also like the fact that they’re not afraid to ask for corporate partnerships like that, because a lot of non-profits like that don’t want to go to Home Depot or Lowe’s or a lot of your other places to get this grant funding,” said Scites. “They want to go to USDA or Rural Development. Sometimes, I think the corporate-private partnerships work so much more efficiently than when you get government agencies involved.”

SALS spent in excess of \$200,000 in both 2023 and 2022 for building materials to support its home rehabilitation and building programs, Scites estimated, in addition to providing programs geared toward summer food/reading and after-school. “If it wasn’t for programs like SALS, this county wouldn’t have fit homes (for the low-income),” Scites said. “Our other non-profit clients, they pick one or two things to do. Not John; that’s not John’s style.” If SALS officials see a need, they fill the gaps, he stressed.

Tax credit programs, various funding sources and contributions from local companies such as Fayco Lumber in Oak Hill, which does “a marvelous job” in helping provide building materials, help form the basis of the housing program, David said.

According to Mike Krantz, developer for Group Workcamps, “Group Workcamps is one of several programs within the Group Cares non-profit service organization. The Workcamp program partners with local organizations, like SALS, in creating better living conditions for residents through home repair. Many of the residents simply can’t complete the repairs physically, nor afford them financially.”

“The repairs are at no cost to the homeowners,” Krantz added. “Workcamps and SALS have a cooperative agreement annually to create this unique opportunity for people to get help. It has had a huge impact over the years we have partnered. Many neighborhoods we have served together often ask when are we coming back.

“The third partner in all of this are our friends at the Kanawha County School District. Principal Mike Wilkinson, food service manager Marsha Burns are instrumental in our success. Many others at the East Bank school pitch in to help.”

Krantz says Group Workcamps is committed to continuing with its annual assistance. “Group Workcamps and the Southern Appalachian Labor School will continue to help the folks as long as we are welcome to do so.” This summer, Group Workcamps had 115 volunteers ages 13-18 and 12 staff ages 21-and-up for its 40th year working with SALS, Krantz said. There were churches represented from Virginia, Colorado, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Georgia, Maryland, New Jersey and S. Carolina.

Continued on page 13

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Winding Down, continued from page 12

Krantz said, "We do mainly minor repairs that are labor-intensive, relatively low-skill projects. Everything from wheelchair ramps to minor painting; from weatherization to porch repair. Essentially, we consider anything except electrical or plumbing projects."

David said, "We have to raise the money for building supplies, and that means we have to sit here and write grants, helter skelter, helter skelter." For example, SALS recently received a grant from the Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation to assist with its summer feeding program. "And then we have some private donors." Unfortunately, he added, some faithful donors have passed on in recent years, and it's been difficult to attract other donors to replace their contributions.

Growth has been "flat" the past six or seven years, even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. And, the need (to serve the community) "is greater," David said. "The work we do for low-income people in rural areas, particularly in non-incorporated areas up hollers, is not being funded."

David is now working on a grant to replace or refurbish trailers in the area. He also says SALS gets calls from various other counties for assistance, saying there aren't similar programs in those counties.



Families in need "shop" at one of the Family Giveaway events at the SALS Community Center in Beards Fork. See poster on page 2