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# THE FUTURE OF COAL COUNTRY

*A local environmental activist fights to prepare her community for life beyond mining.*

**By Eliza Griswold**

One Sunday morning, just after deer-hunting season ended, Veronica Coptis, a community organizer in rural Greene County, Pennsylvania, climbed onto her father's four-wheeler. She set off for a ridge a quarter of a mile from her parents' small farmhouse, where she was brought up with her brother and two sisters. "Those are coyote tracks," she called over the engine noise, pointing down at a set of fresh paw prints.

At the crest of the ridge, she stopped along a dirt track and scanned in both directions for security guards. Around her stretched a three-mile wasteland of valleys. Once an untouched landscape of white oak and shagbark hickory, it now belonged to Consol Energy and served as the refuse area for the Bailey Mine Complex, the largest underground coal mine in the United States.

Five hundred feet below the ridgeline lay a slate-colored expanse of sludge: sixty acres of coal waste, which filled the valley floor to a depth of more than a hundred feet. Coptis stared; it was twice as deep as it had been when she'd visited a year before. "How can it be that after two hundred years no one has come up with a better way of getting rid of coal waste?" she asked. A flock of geese cut a V through water puddled atop the sludge. Recently, activists in West Virginia had paddled an inflatable boat onto a similar pond to bring attention to the hazards of coal waste. Maybe the same tactic could work here, Coptis said. It was dangerous, though; the slurry was too thick to swim through, and at least one worker had fallen in and drowned.

Coptis directs the Center for Coalfield Justice, a regional organization that advocates for people living with the effects of resource extraction. Industrial mining, she believes, leaves places like Greene County environmentally ravaged and reliant on a single,

dwindling resource. At thirty, Coptis is an unlikely activist. She grew up among miners, and her father, a surveyor, sometimes works for the oil industry. She heard the word "environmentalist" for the first time in college, at West Virginia University. (Local hunters and fishermen, whom Coptis sees as some of her best potential allies, prefer to identify themselves as "conservationists.") After graduating, she moved back to Greene County and married Donald Fike, a former marine who worked in the mines. When Coptis brings in outside activists, she often warns them not to expect issues to break down along tidy ideological lines. "The assumption is that rural America is this monolithic community, and it's not," she told me. She also warns them to be prepared for shotguns leaning against kitchen walls. Like many locals, Coptis learned to shoot when she was a child. "I find firing handguns relaxing," she said. "Maybe because I'm so powerless over so much of my life."

Around Greene County, Coptis carries a Russian Makarov pistol, partly to reassure her father. Her fight against coal mining often puts her in opposition not only to energy companies but also to miners concerned about their jobs, and he fears that someone will run her Nissan Versa off a rural road one night. "The coal mines are multimillion-dollar projects," he told me. "Stopping them can be a nasty thing." Coal has dominated the area for more than a century, and mining companies own about fifteen per cent of the county's land. Above ground, their dominion is marked by yellow gates that block roads into valleys designated for waste; when Coptis was younger, a coal company that was expanding its waste area bought a neighboring village and razed it, leaving only a single mailbox. Below ground, the practice of "long-wall" mining, which removes an entire coal seam, can crack buildings' foundations and damage springs and wells, destroying water supplies.

In 2005, this process led to an environmental catastrophe in Ryerson Station State Park, a twelve-hundred-acre preserve that contains some of the county's only pristine land. The center of the park was Duke Lake: a reservoir, created by damming a fork of Wheeling Creek, where people had gathered for decades to swim, paddle canoes, and fish. While Consol was mining nearby, the dam ruptured, and the water had to be drained away. The lake has not been restored; a survey commissioned by the state found that the ground was too unstable. But more than fifteen million dollars' worth of coal remains under the park, and now Consol wants to return and mine it. Coptis's organization, along with the Sierra Club, has filed suit to block the mine from

acquiring the necessary permits, arguing that the mining would destroy three endangered streams. According to Consol's own survey, the mining is predicted to crack the streambeds, draining the water and spoiling the last fishing in the park. "This is property owned by every resident in Pennsylvania," Coptis said. "They don't get to keep plowing through our communities as if we didn't matter."

Since the mid-eighteenth century, Appalachia has supplied coal to the rest of the country, in an arrangement that has brought employment but also pollution and disease. Coptis's opponents argue that the benefits outweigh the costs. Recently, on Twitter, an industry organization called Energy Jobs Matter taunted Coptis: "How much is the Sierra Club paying you to put these families on unemployment?" One of her neighbors warned that if she won her suit the Bailey mine would go bankrupt, devastating the local economy. There are two thousand jobs underground in Greene County, and, according to state estimates, each one supports 3.7 others at the surface. Shutting the mine could eliminate more than seven thousand jobs, in a county of thirty-seven thousand people. "Greene County will become a ghost town," the neighbor wrote.

Coptis argues that the county is already dying. In the past eight years, as coal has ceased to be the dominant fuel used in power plants, production in the United States has dropped by thirty-eight per cent. Until recently, the Bailey mine had three competitors in Greene County; one has closed and another has gone through bankruptcy. Some six hundred jobs have disappeared. In Coptis's old school district, enrollment has declined twenty-four per cent. For Coptis, the changes are urgently personal—her husband was among the miners who lost jobs when the mines closed. "As a community, we need to start to talk about what happens when coal mining stops," she said. "In my lifetime, it's going to happen."

When Coptis goes out to canvass her neighbors, she has the advantage of familiarity. She is brown-eyed and sturdy, with deep dimples that make her look gentle and friendly, even when she is pressing a point, and she is skilled at breaking down the arcana of lawsuits and rights-of-way. "I come from the working class and struggled hard in college," she said. "I had to read aloud to understand things."

But some of her tendencies make her seem strikingly out of place; one local official referred to her, fondly, as a "radical." When Coptis drives to appointments, she often blasts the cast recording of "Hamilton." She teases her husband that she's going to put a sign in their yard bearing their nicknames, Roni and Donnie, so that passersby will think that their brick bungalow belongs to a same-sex couple. She has already planted one controversial sign, near their chicken coop. In black and red letters, it announces, "COAL ASH IS TOXIC."

In Greene County, "Make America Great Again" placards are far more common than anti-coal signs: sixty-eight per cent of the county voted for Donald Trump. Miners say that they considered Obama's environmental regulations a "war on coal," and believed, not without reason, that Hillary Clinton intended to continue his initiatives. When Clinton said, at a speech in Ohio, "We're going to put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business," it didn't matter that she was laying out an economic plan for life beyond coal, or that she immediately added, "We don't want to forget those people." Trump, for his part, denounced "job-killing" regulations. In May, 2016, he told a group of miners at a rally, "Get ready, because you're going to be working your asses off!"

Last month, as Trump announced that America would withdraw from the Paris climate accord, he said that he had been elected "to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris." (Pittsburgh's mayor was quick to point out that Clinton had received eighty per cent of the city's votes.) In Trump's telling, repealing regulation was going to restore Pittsburgh to a manufacturing haven for the middle class. For Coptis, who was born in Pittsburgh, this idea is not just naïve; it is dangerous. "Trump is doing what the government has long done in Appalachia—promising to make changes that only the market can control," she said. Her family had left Pittsburgh when she was in third grade, part of a decades-long wave of migrants fleeing the Rust Belt. Veronica's mother, Alice, worried about her children growing up in a postindustrial city, where gangs and crack cocaine were rampant. She was especially concerned about her son. If the family had not left, Alice told me, "I truly believe my son would be dead now."

Coptis's grandparents had retired to Greene County, near the West Virginia border, and Alice found a two-bedroom farmhouse for sale there, across a dirt road from where they lived. The house was "undermined"—a mining company had bought rights to the

land, then tunnelled underneath—and now a spring spurted from a wall in the basement. But there was space for the family, if the parents slept in an alcove off the living room, and it cost only twenty-five thousand dollars. No bank would offer a mortgage on such a property, so Alice borrowed from her parents and paid for the house in cash.

Coptis's older siblings struggled to adjust to country life, but she loved it. She and her father spent hours in a canoe on Duke Lake, fishing for bluegill. With her grandfather, she hiked through the hills, learning to identify bullfrogs by their call and red-tailed hawks by their raked wing tips. Although the Bailey mine had begun operating a decade before, most of the surrounding valleys were still open land. Coptis grew up listening to the rumble of a conveyor belt, thirty-one miles long, that brought coal to market and carried away waste. As a child, she mistook its lights for those of a distant roller coaster.

Alice was determined that her daughters be given every opportunity that a boy would. She gave Veronica and her older sisters, Andrea and Becky, male nicknames—Roni, Andi, and B.J.—to ease their way in a male-dominated professional world. At West Greene High School, Veronica had a sympathetic English teacher, who helped her procure books—by Truman Capote, Jack Kerouac, and J. D. Salinger—that the school district had banned. Coptis was outraged that "In Cold Blood" had been disallowed because Capote was gay. "Catcher in the Rye" impressed her less. "Holden Caulfield was just some rich white kid," she said.

Despite her contrariness, Coptis was popular. "Roni was so cute—she fit in," Alice said. She ate lunch every day with Donald Fike, the class clown, and studied intently, especially science. Inspired by "CSI," she decided to become a forensic pathologist, and designed an audacious experiment for the state science fair: using the school's electron microscope, bought with a science grant for rural schools, she compared gunshot residue from two of her father's pistols, to see if the higher-calibre one left a larger burn pattern.

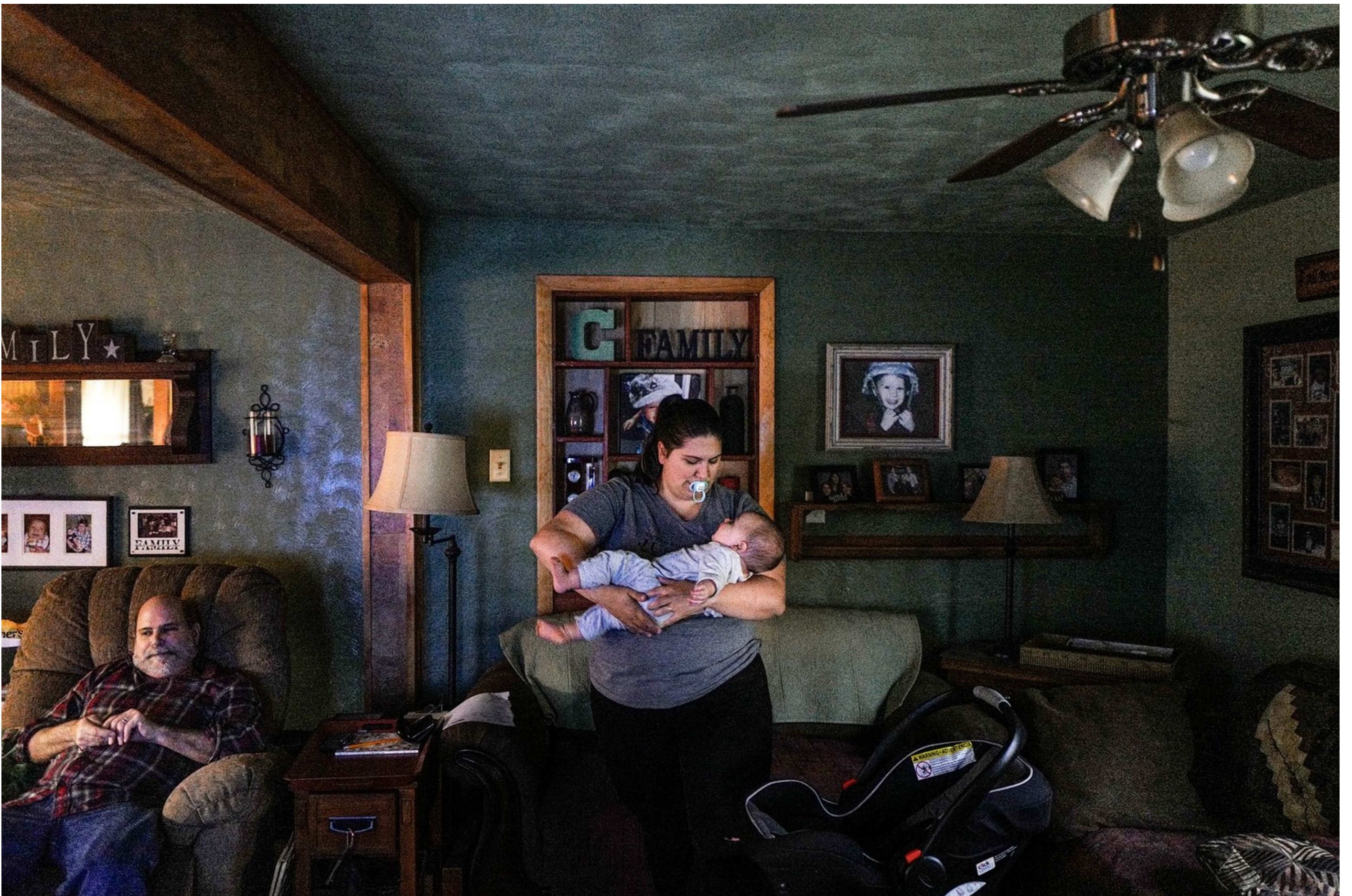
During her high-school years, the Bailey mine grew into a catacomb the size of Manhattan, and the waste from it filled the valley, finally consuming more than two thousand acres of woodlands. The mines shut down roads to move trucks more efficiently, adding thirty minutes to her father's commute, but her parents weren't

concerned. “Pittsburgh back then was so polluted that we didn’t think about it,” Alice said. The mining companies helped quell dissent with gifts, paying for employees’ Thanksgiving turkeys and funding Little League teams. In the nearby village of Graysville, the elementary school’s marquee bore the logo of its corporate sponsor.

Yet the waste in the valley disturbed Coptis. Even if the company owned the land, what gave it the right to spoil the place where people lived? At school, other students told her that speaking out against coal could cost their parents jobs. Coptis, hoping that older people had answers, drove to Graysville, which consists of a single street, anchored by a Presbyterian church and the Creekside Kitchen diner. Outside the general store, she asked two elderly men about coal. They said that living alongside industry entailed “give and take.” Cleaning up pollution was often left to the community, especially when companies went bankrupt, as many did. In Pennsylvania, the legacy cost of restoring mine land and streams has been estimated at five billion dollars. But if the mines vanished how could people afford to live?

One afternoon, a few weeks after Coptis graduated from high school, she was driving by Duke Lake, on her way to her parents’ house, when she caught the rank smell of rotting fish. Through the window, she saw that the water had drained from the lake, leaving a sprawling mud pit, glistening with bluegills’ bodies. “Fish were left flopping in the muck, and people were scooping them up and trying to move them downstream,” she said. The smell lingered for months, and Coptis drove another route to avoid it. Consol, whose mines lay near the lake, denied responsibility. But miners working below said that their digging had clearly breached the dam, according to Coptis: “One of my miner friends told me later that they were waist-deep in water.”

That fall, Coptis was accepted to West Virginia University, and began pursuing every scholarship she could find for science students. Still, even with student loans, an additional loan from an aunt, and income from three part-time jobs, she could barely afford room and board on top of tuition. She applied for food stamps but didn’t qualify. “They told me to have a kid,” she said. Instead, she hunted deer for protein.




*Veronica Coptis with her daughter and her father. Having grown up among coal miners, she is an unlikely activist. Photograph by Peter van Agtmael / Magnum for The New Yorker*

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In school, Coptis became fascinated by Indiana bats—tiny, playful creatures that, she noted, are more closely related to humans than to mice. After graduating, in 2009, she wanted to work as a field biologist, so she trawled list boards and applied to field jobs. She heard nothing. Her personal life was stalled, too. During college, she'd got engaged, to a young man from a mining family, and they moved to an old coal-patch town called Nemacolin. Coptis, thrilled to be starting adult life, bought gifts for her fiancé on credit: a washer/dryer, a big-screen TV, a motorcycle. When she discovered, a few days before their wedding, that he'd left her for her best friend, she loaded everything she'd paid for into her father's truck and moved home. "I realized that I was making my decisions based on a man," she said. "I promised myself never to do that again."

Without any other job prospects, Coptis began waiting tables at the Creekside Kitchen, where her mother also worked. Greene County seemed diminished. As family farms and coal mines failed, the population was shrinking, on its way from a high of

45,394, in 1950, to about 37,000. At the restaurant, Coptis listened as laid-off miners and homeowners spoke about the loss of jobs and of drinking water. Some were distraught when undermining forced them out of their family homes. Others, eager to leave the county, were happy to be bought out, and thought of themselves as winners of the "long-wall lottery." But, when companies bought people's homes, they often instructed them not to discuss the deals. "Most are terrified that if they violate the terms, even in talking casually to a neighbor, the company will take the money back," she said.

Many customers had no Internet access, so Coptis brought her laptop to work for them to use. One morning, one of her regulars, a fisherman and conservationist, asked to look something up. Dunkard Creek, a stream that follows the Mason-Dixon Line, had recently suffered one of the worst fish die-offs in state history, and he wanted to know what had happened. As they were searching online, Coptis came upon the Web site for the Center for Coalfield Justice, founded in 1994 by activists from West Virginia, Ohio, and southwestern Pennsylvania to address the problems of long-wall mining. The site had a listing for a job: a yearlong position, funded by AmeriCorps. She applied and was hired. Later, she discovered that she was the only person to have inquired.

The C.C.J. office, in the Rust Belt town of Washington, Pennsylvania, occupied a brick storefront on Main Street, next door to a clinic for opioid addicts. When Coptis first arrived at the office, she was elated. "It was the first time I'd ever seen people other than me challenging coal," she said. C.C.J. was involved in a lawsuit, trying to force Consol to take responsibility for the draining of Duke Lake. Coptis, assigned to inform people about the case, organized an event called the Dryerson Festival. Standing at a table next to the dried lake bed, she discovered the first principle of organizing in poor communities: always offer food, and, when people who don't care about the cause come up for a second helping, smile and fill their plates. When she visited neighbors, trying to raise support, she learned not to lead with an argument. "I just listen," she said. "Sometimes I don't even mention what we're working on. Most people have never had the chance to tell their stories." The festival became an annual event, and the number of local attendees tripled, from thirty to a hundred—a small victory.

When the AmeriCorps position ended, Coptis moved to the Pittsburgh suburbs to organize against fracking, but it didn't engage her as coal had. "The reason that people

pay more attention to fracking is that fracking threatens rich white suburbs," she said. In 2013, C.C.J. offered her a job as an organizer, and she moved back to Greene County. A few months later, the fight over Duke Lake came to an equivocal end: Consol paid the state a thirty-six-million-dollar settlement, without admitting responsibility for the lost lake. In exchange, the company was granted rights to the coal and gas under the park.

In 2013, Coptis and Donald Fike were married in the park, on the ruins of an old church. A wedding photograph of Coptis—smiling, in sunglasses and a white satin dress, a beer can in hand—hangs in their living room, next to a Semper Fi plaque from Fike's days as a marine. One afternoon, Coptis was in the kitchen, feeding applesauce to their three-month-old daughter, Rory—a name that Coptis selected, as her mother had, because it was gender-neutral. She'd just returned from a nearby shooting range, where she'd held a firearms-training session for African-American and Native American women recently returned from Standing Rock. "I wish we didn't live in a world where women need firearms to protect themselves," she said. "But we do." Now she was taking over childcare from Fike, who was headed to work.

They started dating after Fike returned from Iraq, where, as a Marine lance corporal, he'd trained police in the town of Haditha. Back in Greene County, living with his parents, he didn't want to resume his previous job: working alongside his father in the food-services department of West Virginia University. Like most men his age, he hoped to land a job in the mines. Coal miners in the area earn about thirty-six dollars an hour, which, with additional pay for overtime, often amounts to as much as a hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year, three times the county's median household income. "In Greene County, miners are treated like gods," Coptis said.

Fike's military record helped him get a job maintaining equipment at Emerald Mine. Most of the time, he sat in a shop at the surface, waiting for the phone to ring with orders for new shuttle-car tires, or for cutter shafts, which kept blades spinning to cut coal twenty-four hours a day. One afternoon, bored and lonely, he posted on Facebook that he wanted to go see "The Avengers." A friend told him that Veronica was single, so he called her.

Over dinner at T.G.I. Friday's, Fike bristled when their conversation turned to politics. He was a miner, and Coptis was the enemy. But Fike thought of himself as "open-

minded," and they agreed to go out again. After a few months of dating, he asked if she'd be his girlfriend. She said yes; the next day, she headed to an anti-fracking demonstration in Washington, D.C.

Not long afterward, as they drove to IKEA to buy a dresser, she risked a gentle lecture on the economic prospects of the white working class. "As a man from Appalachia, you have three choices," she told him. "The military, the mines, or prison." To Coptis, this wasn't abstract; her brother, Zach, had served tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. At first, Fike shrugged off her ideas. He felt proud of working at Emerald, where the camaraderie among miners helped him readjust to rural life. "Being a miner is a lot like being in the military," Fike said. During the two world wars, coal miners were often exempt from service, because their jobs were essential to the war effort, and miners retain the sense that they are risking danger to benefit their country. As Fike worked, accumulating underground hours to qualify as a "black hat"—a senior miner—he averted conflict by keeping Coptis's work a secret. "He could've been fired because of what I did," Coptis said. In one tense moment, Fike told her, "I love you, not your job." She replied, "But my job is a lot of who I am."

Still, her activism often riled her neighbors. When her father went out on surveying jobs, he would tell employers not to disclose his last name, for fear of being associated with his daughter. Coptis avoided situations in which talk of her work might lead to fights. "I don't go to high-school reunions," she said. Drinking in local bars, she told people that she handled bats at the zoo.

In 2013, as the E.P.A. worked to tighten mercury regulations, two local power plants announced that they were shutting down. The closings were the result of corporate strategy as much as of regulations (the parent company had recently shut down a string of plants), but people in Greene County blamed C.C.J. Soon after the announcement, a woman came into the office and said that her husband was losing his job at the plant. Distraught, she shouted at Coptis, "Are you going to pay our mortgage?" Coptis invited the woman to sit and talk, but she refused, and Coptis lost her temper. "We had nothing to do with closing those plants," she snapped. "That was the company's decision, not ours." When the woman stormed out, Coptis's boss, Patrick Grenter, admonished her: "Roni, you can't talk to people in the community like that." Later, he corrected himself—Coptis was part of the community.

In 2014, Obama proposed the Clean Power Plan, a sweeping effort to limit carbon emissions and to diminish communities' reliance on mining; his companion budget dedicated ninety-two million dollars to train workers for renewable-energy jobs, to pay for community-college programs, and to fund local businesses and develop tourism. Coptis supported the plan assertively, telling her neighbors, "It's the only time in history that the federal government has helped our communities transition out of dying energy jobs." But the law also mandated that states decrease emissions by thirty-two per cent—which effectively forced them to replace coal-fuelled power plants with natural-gas plants.

That summer, rumors spread that Emerald Mine was running out of coal and was going to close. Fike quit his job and enrolled in a nearby college, where he studied geology. "My bosses said it's probably the smartest thing I could be doing," he said. "They don't want to admit it, but there's no future in mining." Without his mining income, he and Coptis struggled to pay their mortgage, so he began working the night shift at Walmart.

A year later, on August 3, 2015, Obama released the final Clean Power Plan. The same day, the company that owned the Emerald and the Cumberland Mines declared bankruptcy. Joseph Cornelius Culp, a third-generation African-American miner who lives a few miles from Coptis, had worked at Cumberland before it went bankrupt. "Obama's Clean Power Plan cost me my job," he said. As a foreman, he'd spent forty-one years in mines, overseeing white miners who sometimes scrawled "KKK" on walls. Culp had voted twice for Obama. Now, as he saw it, Obama had taken away his livelihood. The idea of new training seemed futile, he said: "I have every certification you can imagine, and I can't get another." In places like Greene County, the federal investment in retraining meant little to miners. No job making solar panels was going to pay someone without a college education a six-figure salary.

As tensions grew between miners and environmental regulators, Coptis became a more visible advocate. In 2014, Consol stopped providing health care for twelve hundred retirees, and the miners came to C.C.J., which assisted in organizing a publicity campaign. Coptis helped lead a protest outside the Consol Energy Center, an arena in Pittsburgh, where the Stanley Cup playoffs were then being held. If the company could afford to pay millions of dollars for naming rights, the miners argued, it could afford

health insurance for men who'd devoted their lives to mining. "The companies treat their workers as pawns," Coptis said later. In the following months, C.C.J.'s membership grew from hundreds to thousands, including a hundred and fifty current and retired miners.

Last year, the Obama Administration announced the Stream Protection Rule, which would make it more difficult for companies to dump waste. At a public meeting in a Pittsburgh suburb, a hundred miners in hard hats gathered to protest the law. Bob Murray, who owns the United States' largest independent coal company, argued in a speech that if the mines closed "the lights will go out in this country, and people will freeze in the dark."

Coptis was the first to dispute him. She talked about learning to fish in Duke Lake and the threat of losing what was left of the park's water. "For my entire life, I've seen the impact of long-wall mining on streams," she said. Undermined streams can vanish entirely, and companies are legally permitted to repair them by pumping water through a hose set in the dry stream bed. Coptis had been building relationships with other advocates for clean water. In her free time, she served as the vice-president of the Izaak Walton League, a national conservation society named for the author of "The Compleat Angler." The league, made up of hunters and fishermen, argued for more cautious exploitation of natural resources, hoping to preserve the wilderness for future sportsmen. In Pittsburgh, as she walked back to her seat, three Greene County miners nodded and gave her a thumbs-up. Patrick Grenter told me that Coptis's status as a local was invaluable. "All the familiar caricatures they have for us—outsider, tree hugger, élitist," he said. "Good luck trying to paint Veronica with that brush."

Other than occasional visits from recovering addicts trying to find the clinic next door, the C.C.J. office is a quiet place. In the window is a sign that Coptis made, notifying citizens that the Pennsylvania Constitution guarantees their right to clean air and water. Inside, posters for the Dryerson Festival hang on the wall, along with a placard that reads, "They tried to bury us. They didn't realize we were seeds."

Last December, Coptis was at the office, preparing for a rally, when she heard a rumor that the state Department of Environmental Protection was going to allow Consol to mine under the streams in Ryerson park. The D.E.P. had scheduled a public hearing the next day at its headquarters, the Rachel Carson State Office Building, in

Harrisburg. At three o'clock that morning, Coptis left Rory at her mother's house and drove two hundred miles to attend the meeting. Seated in front of two D.E.P. advisory boards charged with improving community outreach, Coptis demanded to know if the state had issued a permit. The D.E.P. refused to answer; the director of external affairs said that it could only accept public comment at the meeting, not offer any replies. Furious, Coptis ducked into the stairwell to regroup.

The next day, she learned that the D.E.P. had issued the permit. C.C.J.'s attorney scrambled to appeal and to file an emergency injunction. Coptis doubted their prospects; no environmental group had ever won such a measure in Pennsylvania. Two days later, though, Grenter checked the docket and saw that a judge had blocked the permit, citing the potential for "immediate and irreparable injury" to the streams. "We won!" Grenter said. Coptis high-fived her colleagues and then braced for the response.

Consol laid off two hundred employees, and suggested that the layoffs would be permanent unless the decision was reversed. An industry group put up billboards around the county with depictions of social ills—a laid-off miner, a foreclosed house, a dejected-looking girl wearing a hard hat—and described them as "brought to you by Center for Coalfield Justice." An ad attacking C.C.J. ran on the local country radio station. "They don't respect us—our way of living, our values," it said. "They're not from here. We are."

On a frigid afternoon in January, two hundred coal workers—burly young men with beards—gathered with their wives outside the office. They walked a continuous loop on Main Street, holding signs that said, "Energy Jobs Matter" and "Support Coal: It's Red, White, and Blue." Blair Zimmerman, the Greene County Commissioner, stood on the sidewalk, trying not to seem as if he were taking sides. Zimmerman, who worked in coal for forty years, told me, "I'll always support miners." But the environmental cost of coal was clear to him. "Two things we need on this earth are water and air," he said. "That's what we need to survive."

Among the marchers were Christina and Frank Zaccone, a married couple in their early thirties. Frank didn't mind the cold: every workday, he travelled an hour underground to reach the face, where he sheared coal from the Pittsburgh seam. Christina was excited to be part of something, although she wished she'd designed a sign of her own, instead of simply carrying the one handed to her by a Consol public-

relations employee. She and the other miners' wives had been talking on the phone late into the night, while their husbands were underground, worrying about the lawsuit. Christina noted that the industry claimed the fight over the Bailey mine could cost as many as two thousand jobs. "That's a lot of jobs lost over a stream," she said. "My husband could lose his job over this for sure."

Christina was a good ally for the mining industry, posting support on a Facebook page called "A Coal Miner's Wife." When I met her one morning, a few weeks after the protest, she suggested that the activists were outside agitators. "If this Center for Coalfield Justice was a bunch of farmers who grew up in Ryerson State Park, then I probably wouldn't have marched," she said. She suspected that Coptis was the only C.C.J. member who'd actually "set foot" in the county. She knew that the Sierra Club, based in California, was part of the suit. "I almost feel like they're bullies," she said. "Maybe that's why Trump won, because people were getting bullied."

She and Frank lived with their two young daughters near the town of Prosperity, in a red brick Colonial they rented from Consol. The house had once been worth a hundred thousand dollars, but in 2013 Consol, which was then buying properties in the area, paid more than eight times that amount, intending to rent it to employees, who were unlikely to complain about the effects of undermining. In subsequent years, mining spoiled the water supply and damaged the foundation. The Zaccones now rented the house for six hundred dollars a month and paid a local company to fill the water buffalo—a portable tank that sat on a trailer outside. "I've seen what coal does," Christina said. "It's not pretty, but it's necessary."

Frank, who had worked the graveyard shift, was still sleeping. The Zaccones were planning to take their daughters to the Build-a-Bear store that day, to fashion Teddy bears from the movie "Trolls." The bears were expensive, eighty dollars apiece, but Frank made good money: a hundred and ten thousand dollars a year, enough to allow Christina to stay home. During the recent downturn in the industry, Frank's work had dwindled to three days a week, and Christina, who was then eight months pregnant, had waited tables. Their deductibles shot up; when Christina needed a C-section, she had to pay eight thousand dollars out of pocket. Many miners blamed Obamacare for the change in insurance fees. Since companies were forced to help provide insurance

for everyone in America, the argument went, they could no longer afford the same standard of care for employees.

The Zaccones voted for Trump. "We're not a bunch of toothless, uneducated miners," Christina said. Her daughters ran into the dining room; the older one, who was four, wore a T-shirt that read, "NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF A GIRL." "No one wants to repress anyone else, no one wants to see Roe v. Wade overturned," she added. "We voted for coal here, and just crossed our fingers that Trump wouldn't go too far."

By the time Frank woke up, the girls had got into a box of doughnuts on the dining-room table. He rifled through, looking for a chocolate one. Voting for Trump was the first time he felt that his opinion mattered, he said: "People like me made it happen." Since the election, his overtime hours had increased. Trump might not be able to change the market, but in the short term he could restore jobs. "Coal will never go back to the way it was, but if Trump cuts back on regulation he can give us jobs for the next ten years," he said. "We've got car loans and school loans and kids," Christina added. "Honest to God, if we can make it ten more years, we're cool." But ten more years of burning coal will continue to help drive up the earth's temperature, as well as increase the costs of health problems from pollution, which in Pennsylvania have been estimated at more than six billion dollars a year.

One morning, Coptis sat at a table at the Creekside Kitchen, picking at an egg burrito. Before Duke Lake went dry, the Creekside Kitchen's owner ran an ice-cream shop nearby, which attracted some three thousand visitors each summer. After the lake vanished, she closed the shop and opened the diner, to serve miners. Now the seats were mostly filled with gas-well workers, who arrived in trucks with license plates from Texas, Arkansas, and North Dakota. They ate quietly, and were usually gone in a few weeks.

When Coptis wants to be left alone, she wears a T-shirt that says, "BEYOND COAL." Very few people in Greene County want to contemplate a future without coal; most, like the Zaccones, hope that deregulation can preserve their way of life. But regulation isn't the essential problem. Since the nineteen-thirties, when the rise of unions drove up the price of labor, coal operators have increasingly turned to automation—a process that the unions supported, because it improved safety and efficiency. In the past three

decades, employment in the industry has shrunk from a hundred and eighty thousand jobs to about fifty thousand.

More recently, the greatest factor in the demise of coal has been natural gas, which fracking has made abundant and cheap. Coal, which until not long ago generated half the country's electricity, now provides only a third. Consol has put the Bailey Mine Complex, its last coal asset, up for sale in favor of developing natural gas. Yet gas is not the only competition. "It's not just coal versus gas," Ed Morse, the global head of commodities research at Citigroup, said. "It's coal and gas versus renewables." Solar and wind power are already inexpensive enough to compete with fossil fuels, and, even if the Trump Administration withdraws subsidies for renewables, they are likely to remain economically viable. Trump complained, in his speech about the Paris accord, that under the agreement "China will be allowed to build hundreds of additional coal plants." But China, responding to dismal air quality, has promised to close a thousand coal mines and has increased its use of renewable fuels. "You've really got to overcome market forces, not just in the short term but systemically," Phil Smith, the communications director of the United Mine Workers Association, said. Opening a power plant is a fifty-year investment, and no investor is willing to gamble that coal will be the fuel of choice in fifty years. "Poor Mr. Trump will have a problem living up to his commitment to people whose future of employment is bleak," Morse said. "The age of coal is over."

On February 16th, Trump rescinded the Stream Protection Rule, in one of his first legislative acts. "In other countries, they love their coal," he said at the signing. "Over here, we haven't treated it with the respect it deserves." In recent months, the industry has been mining about six per cent more coal than it did last year, which Trump has claimed as a success, saying, "We're bringing it back, and we're bringing it back fast." But energy analysts say that the increase has more to do with a temporary slowdown in production of natural gas, caused by record-low prices. Last month, Scott Pruitt, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, suggested that the Administration's policies had revived fifty thousand coal-mining jobs. The Bureau of Labor Statistics puts the real number at a thousand, compared with fourteen hundred in the final months of Obama's Presidency. "Trump saying 'I love coal miners'—that's empty promises," Blair Zimmerman, the county commissioner, said.

To Coptis, the Zaccones' faith in Trump's ability to bring back jobs exemplified how his promises delayed the necessary change. "The miners are going to have to be part of this process," she said. That meant giving up six-figure salaries—just as Fike had, when he went to work at Walmart. "Everybody's going to have to sacrifice something," she said.

According to county estimates, Greene County has thirty years left to mine at current rates of production. Now, Zimmerman said, he was facing the question "What can we do when coal leaves?" This conversation was already difficult under the Obama Administration, when federal money was beginning to flow into Appalachia. Now that money is almost sure to disappear. Trump hopes to defund hundreds of projects, such as the Appalachian Regional Commission, which helps retrain miners as coders and farmers. Greene County's power plants used to pay some thirteen million dollars a year in taxes; now they pay none. If not for environmental-impact fees coming from the natural-gas industry, Zimmerman said, his budget would collapse. He is struggling to find a way for the county to reshape itself, with almost no state or federal help. "This should've been looked at fifty years ago," he said.

He'd heard about a commissioner from Kentucky bidding for a zip line to attract tourists, which Zimmerman considered a well-meaning fantasy. "A zip line isn't going to replace thirty coal mines," he said. He hoped for a G.M. or a Toyota factory, or, better yet, an Amazon distribution warehouse, which could supply as many as a thousand jobs. Coptis argues that managing environmental damage is essential to attracting new business. "No one's going to move here if we don't have parks or clean water," she said. She is placing her hope in the RECLAIM Act, now under consideration in a House committee, which would invest a billion dollars in cleaning up mines in ways that support new industries, including tourism and sustainable farming.

After breakfast, Coptis and Fike were going to Ryerson, bringing along Rory. Coptis strapped the baby into the back seat of her Nissan. Along the way, she pointed out the church ruins where she and Fike were married. Nearby, a creek flowed toward one of the endangered streams. Their future remained uncertain. The coal company was appealing the court's decision, and Coptis worried that the mood was against C.C.J. Under Trump, the Environmental Protection Agency is being radically diminished, and the Administration's hostility toward regulation has emboldened local politicians who are sympathetic to coal. Last month, the Pennsylvania senate passed a bill to exempt

underground mining from state clean-water regulations, which would eliminate the basis for the suit against Consol. Governor Tom Wolf, a Democrat, opposes the measure. But Coptis predicts more fights. "If Consol is allowed to destroy these streams, I'm not sure we can stay here," she said. "We've got nothing left to give." To her thinking, the county's residents had already sacrificed enough. "The coal companies took the valley by my parents' house," she said. "They depopulated the county. They took the lake. Why do I have to keep sacrificing?" ♦

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*Eliza Griswold is the author of "Amity and Prosperity: A Story of Energy in America," which will be published in 2018.* Read more »

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