

# The Cost of Coal

When mining companies level West Virginia mountains to get at the coal beneath, whole towns disappear. When a Michigan power plant burns coal to make electricity, it triggers asthma attacks among children living nearby. When coal ash blows onto a Paiute reservation in Nevada, elders die. *Sierra* asked people across the land to describe how the world's dirtiest energy source has disrupted their lives—and what they're doing to stop it.

Photographs by Ami Vitale

Text by Steve Hawk

Seven-year-old Marianna Hildreth holds her one-year-old cousin Mariyah McGhee, who has asthma, in their grandmother's kitchen in River Rouge, Michigan. Far right: DTE Energy's River Rouge Power Plant.





# WEST VIRGINIA

**Not long ago, Lindytown, West Virginia,** was home to dozens of families, many with roots there dating back generations. In 2008, Massey Energy (now Alpha Natural Resources), which was blasting the top off a nearby mountain to get at the coal beneath, began buying out residents and razing their homes. Today, only one original family remains: Roger Richmond and his mother, Quinnie. Mountaintop-removal mines in Appalachia have demolished an estimated 1.4 million acres of forested hills, buried an estimated 2,000 miles of streams, poisoned drinking water, and wiped whole towns from the map.



Right: Roger and Quinnie Richmond in front of their home. Above: A bird's-eye view of the mountaintop-removal mine that emptied Lindytown; to the right of the mine is the Richmond property (circled). Below: A tattered flag beside an empty Lindytown lot.



## Roger Richmond | Lindytown, West Virginia

**I was raised right here in this house.** Completed high school living right here. When Mom brought me home from the hospital, this is where they brought me to. Matter of fact, my footprints are right out there in that walk. Right at the bottom of the steps. Little footprints, about that long. Been there since my feet was that long.

I can remember when I was real young walking through the hall into the kitchen early in the morning and Mom would be at that old cabinet there. She was making biscuits. That's what I'd walk in there for, see if she's got those biscuits made, 'cause I was wanting those biscuits and a couple of strips of bacon to eat. I remember doing that.

We had chickens, pigs. Dad built a pigpen over there. The chicken coop used to sit down there in this corner. Lot of people around here had chickens. We grew a lot of our own basics. Green beans, corn, cucumbers, potatoes, beets, cabbage.

There was houses up and down on both sides up here. After you round this little curve, there was houses on the left-hand side, then there was two on the right. Used to be houses all on up the holler. It used to be pretty bustling, you know. Cars going up and down the road all the time. Kids. Used to have quite a few kids around here.

Sometimes it gets lonely now, a little bit. Momma will be sit-



ting on the couch, and she'll say, "There ain't no more traffic."

Mom, she says a lot of things, like "I want to get out of here." But anytime we go down the road, she wants to turn around and come right back before I even get to where I'm going. I think it's just that Alzheimer's. She'll say, "I got to get home, I got to make phone calls." She can't use the phone no more. Got no idea how to do it.

She tells people she does all kinds of stuff—all the cooking and washing and ironing. Mom does not do none of it anymore. She used to. When she got up, she would start and wouldn't quit till it almost got dark. Either cooking, cleaning, or doing something. Or ironing. Mom always ironed everything. T-shirts. She used to iron her bedsheets. I'm telling you! She wouldn't sleep on a bedsheet unless it was ironed. Now Dad put a stop to it when she tried to iron his undershorts. He said, "You can iron the T-shirts, but you leave them undershorts alone."

Anyway, that's all gone.

I was a miner for about 30 years. I retired when I turned 55. My back's all messed up. I spent most all my time underground.

Coal is life in this state. My own personal opinion, I know coal has a lot of problems, but I think it would definitely hurt this country if they tried to do away with it right now. Until they get a source that they know can replace it. And I do think mountaintop removal sometimes is the only way to get at it. It's necessary.

But I'm not sure that what happened to Lindytown was necessary. Sometimes I wonder if the coal companies couldn't be better stewards in their jobs, in what they do, where they wouldn't have to destroy communities near as much. It makes you wonder whether they could do that or not.

What happened here was the coal company bought everybody out. They decided that to keep from having to pay out a whole lot of money in damages and stuff like that, they'd go ahead and buy as much of it as they could get. Dad didn't want to sell. He didn't want to go through all that movin', all that goin' out lookin' for another place. This was their home, what they'd always been used to. When he passed, he was 87. That was in 2010.

After everybody moved, the coal company tore all the houses down around here, because the vandals just plumb destroyed 'em. Then the company brought a big ol' backhoe in here and tandem trucks, and they loaded 'em all and took 'em out of here. Took everything.

Now when me and Mom go out and come back and I come up this road, particularly after dark, and just see how eerie it is, sometimes it makes you feel sad, you know? I remember back seeing all the houses. Always around the holidays, around Christmastime, come up through here, you'd see practically all the houses lit up with Christmas lights and stuff. Come up through here after dark now, and it's just dark. (Interviewed June 1–2, 2012)





On Memorial Day, more than a dozen women (and a few men) assembled on the steps of the West Virginia State Capitol to have their heads shaved to protest mountaintop-removal mining. This page: Donna Branham, before and after. Opposite: Hair falls on the lap of Tori Wong (below), who drove in from Virginia. Paula Swarengin (above) gets shorn by Larry Gibson, founder of the Keeper of the Mountains Foundation. Gibson died of a heart attack in early September.

**Paula Swarengin**  
Glen White, West Virginia

**When they started stripmining,** I can remember my grandfather saying that he'd bag groceries before he'd blow up mountains. *He* said it was wrong, and he was a coal miner for 45 years. It's all he ever did.

In 2000 my grandpa died and my grandmother started getting sick, so I decided to take my boys back to West Virginia. I noticed things weren't right. A little girl next door had a rare form of bone cancer. There was a little boy, 14, dying of kidney failure. One day I was a working single mom, and the next day I was standing on mountains screaming at people.

I am a coal miner's daughter. I am a coal miner's granddaughter. But I am also a mother, and there's no way you can justify poisoning my children. My children have just as much right to a future, and just as much right to enjoy these mountains and the beauty of these mountains, as I did. And I will fight to my death for that. Watch out, King Coal, because here come the Queens of Appalachia. (Interviewed May 28, 2012)



**Donna Branham**  
Lenore, West Virginia

**It's a hard decision to take your hair off.** It really is, but it's not as hard as watching them destroy my land, watching them destroy my children's future.

I grew up in a coal camp in Scarlet, West Virginia. The load-out for the tippie was like a mile and a half below my home. So I was used to the dust and the noise and the pollution.

My dad worked 39 years at that mine. When he retired, they shut the mine down, and him and my mother thought that they would have a really good life in that community. All of my dad's brothers and sisters—there were 11 of them—lived there. I had grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, you name it. We all lived there. It was a nice, peaceful way of living.

Well, the same company came back and started stripmining. They let off shots that tore the foundation of my parents' house apart. The chimney pulled away from the house. The roof leaked. Their life was just miserable.

The breaking point came one evening when my



dad was getting out of the bathtub. It was around 7 in the evening, and they weren't supposed to be blasting after 5 P.M. They let off a big blast and the house shook like there was an earthquake. My dad had a heart attack.

So they ended up selling, which I think was what the mining company wanted anyway. My mom and dad moved, along with my aunts and uncles and everybody. The family just got scattered. My mom made it one year after they moved from Scarlet. And the day she died, I held her head in my lap and she cried for home. She wanted to go home.

They always talk about the cost of coal. I can tell you the *true* cost of that lump of coal. It cost my family. The only people that get rich are the people that own the coal mines.

When I felt those first streaks of the razor in my hair today, I felt empowered. I felt liberated. It gave me strength. I want the world to know how much it hurts my people. If they would come and live where we live and see what we see, they'd be out there rallying with us. My hair will grow back, but the mountains will not. (Interviewed May 28, 2012)





Charles Beller (above) and Hershel Aleshire (opposite). A nearby mountaintop-removal mine, which came within 350 feet of Aleshire's property, caused Blair's population to dwindle from 700 people in the 1990s to fewer than 50 today, according to the Blair Mountain Heritage Alliance.

**Charles Beller**  
*Blair, West Virginia*

People think that this mountaintop mining just moves on down the road quickly, but it's not that way. We took out about 14 seams of coal here, and it took six, seven years to do it. No idea how much coal they pulled out. Millions and millions of tons. Somebody made some money. Oh yeah.

From '94 up to '99, it was so dusty around here you couldn't hardly stand it. It got to the point you couldn't sit on your porch. You'd even have to take the pets in the house. And then you had all the noise from the equipment—backup horns, all that—24 hours a day. That was right back there the top of this ridge. It was a manmade hell here.

My mom and dad, they lived right here beside of me. They put their life savings in their house, and then because of the mountaintop mining, they only enjoyed it for three or four years before they had to pack up and leave.

I worked in the mines. I didn't like the underground because I was always afraid of the top fallin'. I worked on the mountaintop mine. That comes back and haunts me to this day. I was part of destroying my own community. (Interviewed May 29, 2012)

**Hershel Aleshire**  
*Blair, West Virginia*

I'm not the oldest person in Blair. Alfred Jones is the oldest. He's about 86 or 87. I'm 83. I still drive the four-wheel all the time. Yesterday we rode some 40 miles through the mountains.

I was born up the road and lived there till I was about eight years old. Then my daddy bought this holler, and I've lived here ever since. Back when I was a kid, we made our own fun. We fished and we played ball and rode horses. We run after girls. Some of it I ain't gonna tell ya. Turn the camera off, I still ain't gonna tell ya. I's kind of mischief when I was young.

I raised my family right here. My daughter, she lives about 10 miles on down the road. She's got two kids and my son's got two. Great-grandkids, I got five of them. I worked in the mine on a preparation plant for 42 and a quarter years. My daddy got me the job, and I worked with him till he retired. I retired in 1992.

I hate to see 'em destroy the mountains, but I know people's got to work. And I don't know where one balances with the other. Because what they're doing, it'll never be no good anymore. Trees will never grow back. All it'll be is a briar patch. Like I say, I don't know. (Interviewed May 29, 2012)





# MICHIGAN

For generations, people in River Rouge, Michigan, have lived within sniffing distance of a coal-fired power plant, an oil refinery, a sewage-treatment plant, a steel mill, and other industrial polluters. No studies have precisely measured the cumulative health impacts of those operations on nearby residents, but in 2004 the nonprofit Clean Air Task Force calculated that particulate pollution from coal combustion at the River Rouge Power Plant alone (one of nearly 400 coal-fired plants still in operation nationwide) is annually responsible for 44 deaths, 72 heart attacks, and 700 asthma attacks in the surrounding community.



Above: The Marathon Petroleum oil refinery in southwest Detroit, which abuts River Rouge. As part of a \$2.2 billion expansion that will enable it to process tar sands oil from Canada, Marathon has been buying homes adjacent to the plant.



## Siobhan Washington *River Rouge, Michigan*

**My father was an outdoorsman.** The whole family was constantly taking camping trips. My father bought property over in Canada. The very first time I went over there, I was like, “Oh. My. God. You can breathe!” When we came home to River Rouge, you could see the haze over the city—this orange and green haze. I begged to go back.

Me and my girlfriends talk about this all the time. About the pollution and how it’s time to get away and go somewhere where you can breathe and you’re not living next to all this.

I don’t understand why more people aren’t concerned about it. People are dying off, slowly but surely, in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s. When my great-grandmother passed away, she was 106 years old. And when my mom’s mom passed away, she was 76. My mother was 66. They’re dying younger.

My grandbabies have asthma. My daughter has an inhaler with her wherever she goes, for her and her daughter. When I went to visit them yesterday, there’s my granddaughter with a mask on her face. I didn’t have that growing up. Nobody had asthma in my family.

Watching my kids not being able to breathe is hard. It hurts as a grandparent. *(Interviewed August 13, 2012)*



Above: Five-year-old La’Miyah Hildreth wears a nebulizer in the kitchen of her grandmother Siobhan Washington. Below: Washington checks the breathing of her one-year-old granddaughter, Mariyah McGhee. Opposite: Washington hugs her granddaughter Marianna Hildreth while some of her other grandchildren play.





Nikeya Aaron, 9, swings in Belanger Park, which is adjacent to the coal-fired River Rouge Power Plant.



**Alisha Winters**  
*River Rouge, Michigan*

I've been in Ecorse and River Rouge for the past three years, almost four. I have seven children. We live in Rouge now, right by the train station that brings in coal to the power plant and the steel plant. We're right in the midst of it.

I was shocked when people started telling me that we're in one of the most polluted areas in Michigan. Sometimes when you drive out here, you have to roll up your windows. You're like, "What is that smell?"

Two of my children have asthma. My son has had asthma since he was born, and my daughter was just diagnosed this summer. It very much took me by surprise. She had to be rushed to the hospital. She stopped breathing. Now she has an inhaler that she has to use daily.

If you circle around in this community, you'll see a lot of people on oxygen, a lot of people with cancer. They don't really have a clue what happened or where it started.

I volunteer. That's my passion. I enjoy being able to help and serve the people of River Rouge. I feel like my obligation to the community is to make them more aware. Most of the people here have been at the bottom of the bottom. But if I can smile through my ordeal and pass my smile off to someone else, my day is worth waking up. It's worth getting dressed and doing things like going out in the rain to help with the farmers' market. It's also a good role model for my kids. All of my children are involved in volunteering.

I'm very hopeful. I'm excited. Because I know that I play a role in it. In 10 years I picture Rouge being a very clean, safe environment for our children to live and work. Together, we're going to do great things to make it better for our children. I say that with great confidence. It's gonna happen. (Interviewed August 13 and 15, 2012)



Clockwise from above: Alisha Winters, 31, takes son Robert Connor, 13, and daughters Myshelle James, 4 (with bike), and Deborah Smith, 5, to volunteer at a local farmers' market. Jayvon Riley, 11, fishes with James Beverly, 7. Just across a canal from the intensely industrialized Zug Island, Kevin Morris shows off his catch.



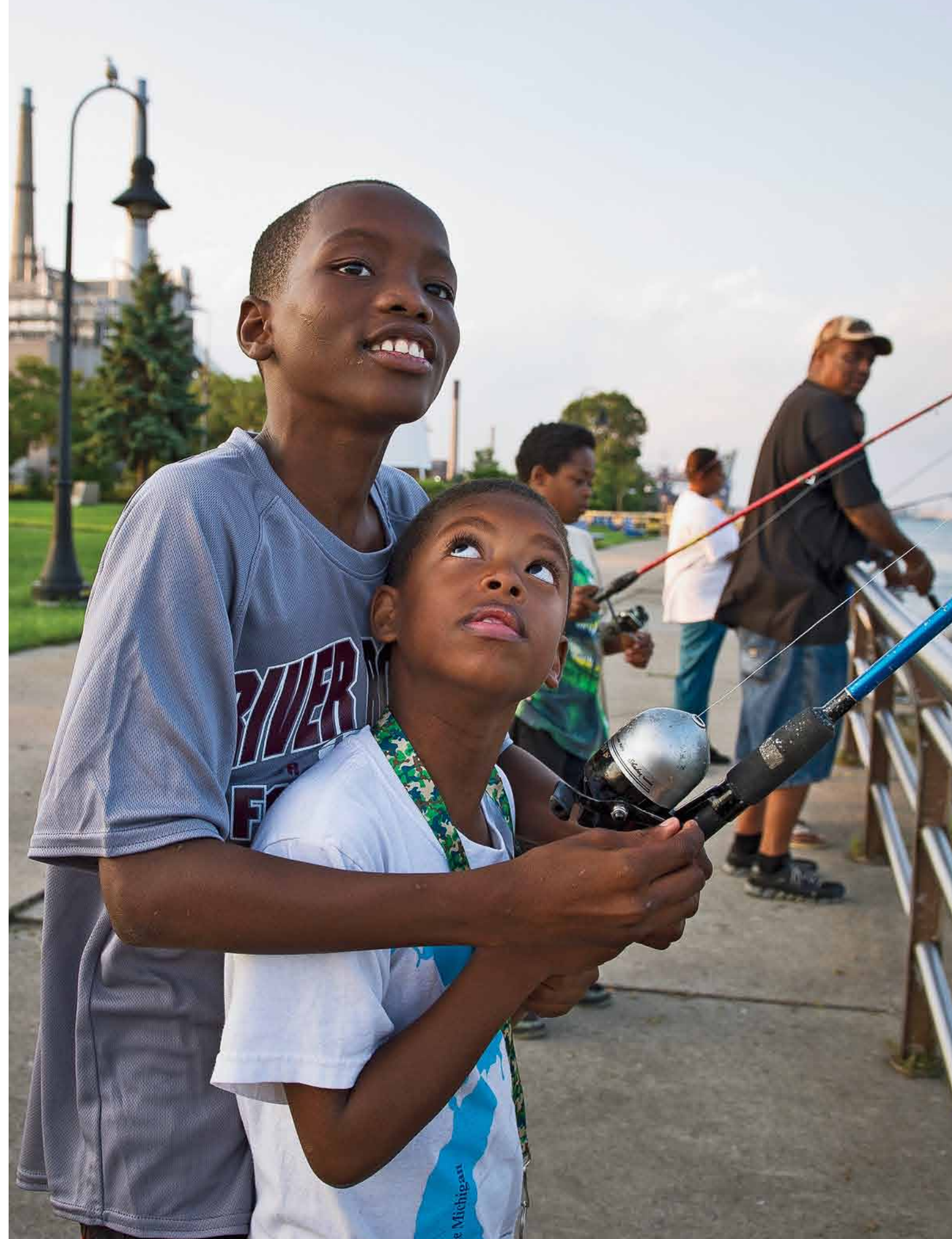
**Kevin Morris**  
*Detroit, Michigan*

There are signs posted all up and down the Detroit River that tell you what type of fish have the most contaminants. It's a scale from good to bad, with the fish that are good at the top. Those are the ones I eat, the ones on the top.

I only eat predatory fish: walleye, perch, silver bass, muskies, northern pike, like that. They don't sit in one spot like, say, a catfish. That's a bottom-feeder, so whatever's on the bottom, they're going to contain it. Around here it's mercury.

See those piles over there across the water? That's coal. Stand here during a northwesterly wind and you can feel it. You get it in your nose, your ears, on your clothes. I wouldn't recommend anyone fishing out here when the wind's blowin' from that direction.

Seems to me there should be some type of screen over it. But I'm only a guy that's fishin', versus a billion-dollar corporation. (Interviewed August 15, 2012)





# NEVADA

Since 1965 the coal-fired Reid Gardner Generating Station, about 50 miles northeast of Las Vegas, has dumped its combustion waste into uncovered “ponds” beside the Moapa Band of Paiutes Reservation. Tribal members believe that the coal ash—which contains mercury, arsenic, selenium, and other toxins and blows into their village in dust storms—has caused asthma attacks, cancer, heart disease, and many premature deaths among the 200 residents there. More than 1,100 such coal-ash sites exist nationwide; none is subject to federal regulation.



Clockwise from above: The Reid Gardner Generating Station. Summer Nickrand (second from left) and sisters Ayona, Zayda, and Aaliyah Hernandez cool off in the Muddy River. Surita Hernandez at home; she and four of her five children have asthma.



## Surita Hernandez *Moapa, Nevada*

**When it's windy, you can feel it and taste it**—the dust. I guess it's the ash. It's like a dark cloud. When it comes, we usually don't go out, but it'll still come in through the cracks and vents.

Four of my five kids have asthma. My oldest daughter, Aaliyah, they first told me she had asthma when she was a few months old. My second daughter, Zayda, she kept getting sick. My mom took her to the doctor one day when she was six or seven, and they had to call the LifeFlight helicopter because her breathing was so low. They called me at work, and I just started crying right there.

My son, Gyiel, when he was a couple of months old, I had to take him back to the hospital because of asthma. And then my youngest, Ayashi, she was two weeks old when we had to take her back for some kind of respiratory issue. That's when they gave us a nebulizer to use at home.

It just seems like everybody around here has some kind of health problem. My own family's health problems—I can't say for sure it's because of the plant. But I do know that the plant has all those chemicals and the bad stuff flowing from there, and it's right behind our yard. That's the thing to me: that we don't know. *(Interviewed on July 22, 2012)*







**Kami Miller**  
Moapa, Nevada

**Growing up here, everyone knew everybody.** We were active. We had a little park down the road. There was a swing set, slide, the little bendable horses. It was fun. We had trails in the hills. You just walked around. No technology or the advances they have now, where everybody just stays inside.

We were living here in Moapa when I was born. Then we moved to Vegas but came back when I was 10. That's when I started having to use an inhaler. I'm 37 now and I still use it. A month ago I went to Oregon and didn't use my inhaler at all. But as soon as I got back to our area, I was sucking on it.

My son has the same problems. He has an inhaler, and at least once a month he has to use a nebulizer to open up his lungs. If I neglect it, he has to go on steroids or it can turn into pneumonia or bronchitis.

These people who come in and haul away the fly ash from the plant say it's not harmful. But I say, "If it's not harmful, why does your wife have to check you to make sure you didn't bring any into the house? Why does the paint peel on your vehicle after you've been out there on a rainy day?"

Sometimes I wonder, Where did my son's autism come from? I grew up on the hill above the tribal building, and I always wonder if it started there, with

his development, because that's where I was living when I was pregnant with him. The dust from the plant would come through the valley and then come up to us. We lived there for 10 years, and then I inherited a house down here, closer to the plant.

It's a miracle when people reach age landmarks here. Fifty is a miracle around here. I left last week for a business meeting and came home to two elders, two brothers, in the hospital. The driver who picked us up is like, "Russell and Calvin are in the hospital." For those two brothers to be in the hospital at the same time, how do you deal with that? They have another brother, Randy, and in one fell swoop there could be just the one brother left.

We have a small cemetery with little family plots, and ours is filling up. It's kind of warped, because we're like, "We might have to move our family plot to accommodate all the people who are dying."

I hope to be buried there, but I don't see it in the near future—at least I hope not. I have a son to look out for. My lungs, you know, if they don't hold up . . . or what if it moves to where my heart doesn't work? It makes a deep impact, because I want to be here for my son.

It's OK, sweetie. Mommy's just crying because she's happy, OK? He's a little bleeding heart. When he hears his mom cry, he gets a little teary-eyed himself. *(Interviewed July 19, 2012)*

Clockwise from left: Kami Miller and her son, Lane. William Anderson, tribal chairman of the Moapa Band of Paiutes. Jennifer Samson and her cousin Russell Samson, who died less than two weeks later. In a television interview shortly before he was hospitalized, Russell said that power plant emissions had made him sick: "This got into my chest, my lungs."

**Jennifer Samson**  
Moapa, Nevada

**My parents passed a long time ago.** All my brothers and sisters are gone except for my half sister—she's up in Reno. I'm the only one left. I'm the last one on the caboodle.

Russell and Calvin, the boys, they're brothers and they live together. They live down there right next to the plant. Anywhere you go down there, you can smell it. I always told them, "If you want to get away anytime, come up to my house."

Calvin is my first cousin, but I look at him as my brother. And Russell, he's also my first cousin, but I look at him as a dad and a brother and an uncle and my best friend that ever came into my life.

We have nicknames for each other. We know these ladies who can't say "Russell," and they always call him "Wushell." So I always call him "Wushell." And they can't say "Jennifer" either. They call me "Juniper." So when he calls me, he always says, "You're my Juniper." That's just between me and him.

Now that they're both in the hospital, I go down to their house and check their messages and feed their dog and do what I have to do. But I just can't stay there very long now. I'm too used to having them with me. *(Interviewed July 20, 2012. Russell Samson died of cancer on August 2.)*



**William Anderson**  
Moapa, Nevada

**I'm the chairman for the Moapa Band of Paiutes.** We've been utilizing this land and the river for farming for many generations. We've been here forever.

We have over 71,000 acres of land here, and we've set aside about 2,000 acres to build a solar energy plant. What we're trying to do is find a solution to help our people breathe clean air. We want to show that we're taking the effort to be more responsible with the land, to provide something that's clean and safe.

This is not just for us, but also for the people who live nearby. If the power plant were to shut down, the job loss would be negative on the whole area. That's why we're trying to come up with a solution that provides economic development, so we can hire more and more people from the surrounding community.

We want to create jobs, and we want to show our neighbors that there are ways to produce energy other than polluting the earth. *(Interviewed July 19–20, 2012)*



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