

Students grow through Kentucky trip

BY BRIAN CARLSON
Senior Reporter

CHAVIES, Ky. — At the base of the steep, rocky Appalachian hill where the Grigsby family makes its home, spring arrived with brilliant sunshine and a day so calm that even the neighborhood dogs and cats seemed lulled by the stillness.

Florence Grigsby pulled open her front door, which never quite shuts, and stood, hands on hips, on her front porch. Her 4-year-old daughter, Amy, would soon return on the bus from Head Start, and Grigsby would walk up the dirt road to her neighbor's house to wait for her.

The Grigsby home, amid the rugged beauty of Appalachia in rural Perry County, Ky., is less than picturesque.

Its walls need better foundation

support. The narrow strip of land between the hill and the shady side of the house is awash in mud. The yard is littered with everything from dolls to old milk cartons to bits of clothing.

A group of University of Nebraska-Lincoln students spent their spring break working on houses like Grigsby's during a trip sponsored by Cornerstone, a United Ministries in Higher Education campus ministry at UNL.

Times can be tough in Appalachia, where the rocky landscape and economic and geographical isolation have created one of the poorest areas in the United States.

But seated in the shade under the slightly jingling wind chimes of her neighbor's porch, Florence Grigsby said she wouldn't ever want to leave.

"I doubt if I ever will," she said in her Kentucky accent. "It's the only life we know, and we love it."

Rugged individualism

Chavies is up the road from Hazard, a small town where, alas, there was no sign of the General Lee or Daisy Duke.

Hazard and Perry County were named after the War of 1812's Gen. Oliver Hazard Perry, famous for the one-liner, "We have met the enemy and they are ours." Chavies is named for a girlfriend of Perry's.

Despite its poverty, Appalachia retains much of the raw beauty and splendor that Daniel Boone and other frontiersmen encountered more than two centuries ago.

But the same rugged terrain and rural isolation that gave rise to the rugged individualists has made economic development difficult, and the region struggles with poverty and substandard housing.

"Basically, Appalachia has been isolated from the rest of the nation," said Bobby Ellard, a native of Appalachia and director of housing services in Chavies for the Appalachia Service Project. "People grow up in poverty and never leave. It's like being an island in the middle of America."

The UNL group worked with ASP, a nonprofit Christian organization which provides free home repair and low-interest loans for new home construction to low-income residents of Appalachia.

In the Kentucky River Area Development District, which includes the Chavies area, per capita income is \$6,845. In the region's population of 123,495, 38.5 percent of households are classified as very low income.

But those familiar with the region say residents seem to possess a set of values often at odds with the high-tech, high-energy modern American society.

Ellard said strong family ties and a love of the land are characteristic of the people of Appalachia.

"Money is not the motivating factor here for many people," he said.

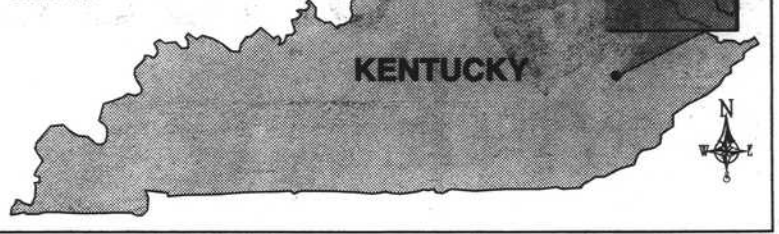
Kyle Roberson, volunteer and community coordinator for ASP in Chavies, said the people of Appalachia, far from being consumed by their economic difficulties, find happiness in the simple things in life.

Visitors to the region often wonder when they see a satellite dish sitting outside a house that needs a new roof,

Chavies, Kentucky

UNL students traveled to Chavies, Ky., on a trip sponsored by UMHE Cornerstone to participate in the Appalachia Service Project. In this region, 38.5 percent of households are described as having "very low income."

Source: ASP



JENNIFER WALKER/DN

Roberson said. But for many people, making a monthly payment for satellite service brings enjoyment and is easier than making a large one-time investment in home repair, he said.

Yards full of long-neglected trash don't symbolize laziness, he said. Garbage services have only recently begun in mountain areas and garbage removal is expensive, he said. Low-income households with children are bound to accumulate garbage, he said.

Many Appalachian families have lived in the region for generations, forging family closeness and an attachment to the beauty and freedom of the land, Roberson said.

"If they're happy, they have more than what money can buy," he said.

A lifetime in Appalachia

Florence Grigsby appears to exemplify the Appalachian ethic of which Ellard and Roberson spoke.

She grew up in Lexington and moved to Perry County when she married Warren Grigsby at age 19. Because she had to take care of her mother, who had lung problems and epilepsy, she wasn't able to attend high school.

Warren Grigsby works at a Hazard grocery store. Florence Grigsby hopes to earn her GED so she can go to work in an area plastics factory.

Four sisters live near her in Perry County, including one just across the street who entertained a UNL work crew one afternoon by singing Kentucky folk hymns.

As the conversation turned to her children, Grigsby beamed. She has high hopes for her children, including a good education and rewarding careers — and a lifetime right here in Appalachia.

Her oldest daughter, Anna, is 15 and wants to be a pediatrician. A straight-A student, Anna has to keep the boys at arm's length so she can concentrate on her studies and earn a college scholarship, Grigsby said.

Although she could make more as a pediatrician outside Appalachia, Anna wants to stay in the region because there aren't many doctors here.

Grigsby's daughter Murray, 13, wants to be a veterinarian, and gets to

spend plenty of time around animals with the family's several cats, dogs and roosters that roam free on the hillside. Warren, 14, wants to be a forest ranger.

Asked why she is so fond of the region, Grigsby said, "Freedom." Her children are more free to play than in the city and are free from influences such as drugs, she said.

Grigsby said she wants her children to achieve their dreams, but hopes those dreams come true in Perry County.

"Maybe they can get to do the things I didn't get to do," she said. "I really don't want them to leave. This is the only life they've known."

Growing spiritually

Participants in the UNL trip, after a week of digging holes, hacking at rocks, pouring concrete, painting and roofing, said the trip was valuable in a number of ways — from growing spiritually to making friends to learning to serve.

Mandy Johnson, a junior deaf education major, said she enjoyed taking a break from the fast pace of college life to view a more easygoing culture.

She said the trip helped her focus on becoming closer to God and allowed her to gain a better understanding of the way of life in Appalachia.

"We stepped out of our comfort zones," she said. "Inside it gives you a sense of accomplishment, yet it also humbles you in a way."

Matt Weber, a freshman music education major, said he was initially shocked by the living conditions in Appalachia. But as the week progressed, he gained an appreciation for the values he saw in the people.

"Even though they lived in bad conditions, it doesn't seem to affect them as much as you would think," he said.

The Rev. Phil Owen, campus ministry educator for Cornerstone, said the trip was a way to serve, love others and learn to refrain from judgment.

"I think one of the things we can take back with us is an appreciation of the humanness that we see when we put a face on something like Appalachian poverty," he said. "It sets our internal compass on what's important, what's of value."

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