

Women Who Make a Difference



Laura Rose with (l. to r.) Teddy Faircloth, Polly Birmingham, Ann Snow, Sarah Shell, Pastor John Yost and Doc Greenfield.

How a Tiny Town Won Back Its Water

By Anne Cassidy

The townsfolk filed uneasily into the Blairton United Methodist Church. They loved this familiar old place, the center of their small village in Berkeley County, a part of the West Virginia eastern panhandle. Many had lived in this community all their lives. But on this October night in 1998 they were meeting to fight for Blairton's survival. Three years earlier they'd learned that the quarry company that supplied their water could no longer do so, citing the expense and liability of maintaining old pipes. Without water there could be no Blairton. And to proud, salt-of-the-earth folks like resident Ann Snow, 80, nothing could have been worse: "Blairton is my home. I wasn't going to give it up."

A local limestone quarry company built Blairton almost one hundred years ago to house its workers, and free water was part of the package. People were eventually allowed to buy their houses, but not the land beneath them, and a clause in the contracts gives the company the right to reclaim the land with 30 days' notice. Once residents learned in 1995 that Riverton, the out-of-state corporation that now

owned the quarry, planned to turn off the tap, they sought alternate water systems—wells, cisterns, county water. Nothing worked. Although Riverton insists through its attorney, Charles Printz Jr., that the company just wanted out of the water business, many residents thought that Riverton really wanted them to move so the company could tap the limestone under their homes. After two years of getting nowhere, citizens filed suit against Riverton in 1997, hoping

Thanks to Laura's efforts, Governor Cecil Underwood (below) lent his support to Blairton. Now red hydrants symbolize the town's victory.



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“The residents of Blairton had no intention of letting their community become a ghost town.”

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a jury would give them what no one else could. Blairton, population 102, had never been a large town, but it had no intention of becoming a ghost town.

One of the people in church for the October meeting was Laura Rose, an attorney from nearby Martinsburg who was running for state delegate. As soon as the residents began to speak, Laura was drawn in. “Their stories touched my heart and sparked my interest,” she says. And no wonder. Many residents, like Sarah Shell, whose grandfather walked from Pennsylvania to take a job with the quarry decades ago, remembered the old days, when there was dancing every week in the community hall.

It was obvious to Laura that Blairton citizens loved their town and were in the right, but she thought it would be difficult for them to win the lawsuit. So she offered her services free of charge. “I’m a fighter for lost causes, and this one looked pretty lost,” says Laura. Her first battle, however, was to win the trust of the people. They didn’t know what to make of this forceful young woman who had already run for office (and lost) twice. The next election was right around the corner. Was she just trying to snag some publicity?

The answer seemed to come a few weeks later, when Laura again lost her bid for state delegate—but not her interest in Blairton. Still, the community was hesitant enough to send Harlan “Doc” Greenfield, a gregarious man who had become the town’s spokesman, to talk with Laura. Doc was blunt: “I said, ‘I’m not sure I trust you,’ and she said, ‘Let me prove you can.’” She immediately put teeth in her words by representing Blairton at a county commission meeting. Doc believed her then. So he and other residents switched from attorney Michael Scales, who filed the suit, to Laura. Blairton was still David fighting Goliath—but now David had a bigger slingshot.

Laura had several strategies to help the town. First, she registered at the state capitol to be a lobbyist for Blairton (making it the only West Virginia town to have one) and then she began knocking on the doors of the powerful—the state attorney general, the governor. Next, she lobbied for legislation that would provide quarry towns the same protection as coal towns. It wouldn’t solve all of Blairton’s problems, but it would provide some leverage for the lawsuit, which was now in mediation.

“The quarry legislation had been proposed for a number of years and had always fallen apart,” Laura explains. “It finally passed in 2000. Blairton became the poster child for that legislation.” Eventually, the attorney general came to town and drove around in his pickup truck to meet residents and find a place to put a new water line.

Even though Riverton had continued to supply water

during negotiations—“The company never wanted to leave Blairton high and dry,” Printz says—the town’s fears of extinction seemed justified when, after decades of idleness, Riverton began quarrying again at the Blairton site. By then, Laura, Doc and other townsfolk had decided that if need be they would form a human chain to protect the town. “I said the only way I’m going to leave is when they carry me away,” recalls resident Teddy Faircloth.

To make sure the county knew of Blairton’s resolve, Laura arranged for TV cameras and newspaper reporters to attend meetings. “Riverton began to look awful,” she says. “All we wanted was a basic human right to water.” Printz, however, says the local news stories weren’t balanced and focused mostly on the plight of Blairton.

Throughout the water crisis, residents pulled together like never before. If there was a meeting, people came. If money was needed, they raised it. And Laura continued to fight. One January day in 2000, with negotiations hanging in the balance, she had a serious traffic accident and was hospitalized. “Everyone was sending me flowers and praying for me,” Laura says. When the attorney general called to see what he could do, Laura had him promise to allow her into the executive session of a special county commission meeting about Blairton. And she went—using a walker. “That meeting was key,” Laura says. “The commission came as close as they could to saying, ‘These folks are going to get water.’” Laura knew she had to seize the moment, so she continued to hobble into meetings with a cane.

With public support mounting, new quarry legislation in place and state officials backing Blairton, the residents decided to drop the lawsuit so that a resolution could be hammered out. The Riverton Corporation agreed to help connect Blairton to the water supply of Berkeley County. The cost, up to \$450,000, would be shared equally by the state, the water district—and Riverton, too!

For Laura, working for Blairton has been a revelation. “I never wanted to be a lawyer to make money. I wanted to help people,” she says. “The folks here have been so good to me; they are so loving. I can’t thank them enough because they’ve given me more than they’ll ever know.”

Blairton feels likewise. The new water pipes were laid last summer, leaving a trail of bright red fire hydrants through the community. They are the proud emblems of a hard-won prize as the town awaits the new water, which is expected to begin flowing soon. Last fall, when the deal was finally struck, Blairton villagers once again came together, this time in jubilation. At the Blairton United Methodist Church and in a water celebration at the local fairgrounds, residents, public officials—even Riverton Corporation executives—gathered to rejoice.

“It was a night with no animosity,” Doc says. Several people, including the governor, attorney general and Laura Rose, were presented with awards, each one featuring an apt quotation from the Old Testament: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” **FC**

In recognition of the outstanding achievements of Laura Rose, Pond’s is making a \$1000 donation to the nonprofit organization of her choice.