

Good Morning,

Thank you Michelle Howell and Heather Hyden for an awesome set up. I am honored to be at the table with these women who are leading the way in creating a physically and fiscally healthy KY one community, market and garden at a time.

Thank you Legislatures for being here and thank you for listening. I don't say that lightly. I sincerely thank you for listening and for hearing. Your task is much more difficult than mine of speaking today, and this isn't easy for me. I thank you for not only listening, but hearing what I say and also understanding what I am trying to say.

In EKY, where I have driven from this morning, we have a hard time listening to folks when we don't know who they are, so let me try to tell you who I am and put you at ease and perhaps you'll find we have some common ground.

My name is Valerie Ison Horn. At home, even at the age of almost 50, I would say, "I'm Kendall and Carol Ison's daughter," and most folks will smile and say, "oh, I know them"...and we're good to go. I wish you knew them. I say it with as much pride as I suspect George W. Bush or any of you would of your parents. One reason I opted to stay in Whitesburg last night is we were having a community meeting at the Cowan Community Center planning a celebration for it's 50th year. My parents were among others who began the center then and my mother is giving more planning to this event than her 50th wedding anniversary. Cowan Community Action Group is one of the battles won. Students from the Cowan Creek Mountain School performed for the Legislature this Spring. Good things are happening there, come celebrate with us. Incidentally, they met in 4th grade at the one room school they eventually taught in and later became the community center. I/we have deep roots and they are hard to let go and hurtful to be told that is our only choice for a healthy life. It just doesn't feel like that is our only choice. I have always lived in EKY and as most in the mountains, have a very strong relationship w/my place that we don't want to leave. In fact, I opted to sleep in my own bed last night and get up at 4:30 this morning and make the three and a half hour drive to be here to speak to you all today, rather than leave last night. I'll drive home today and be back in Berea in the morning for a CFA Farmers Market Support Gathering.

Folks in EKY are often not in the room when plans and decisions are being made and that is unfortunate. Please know it is not because we don't care, don't have ideas, opinions or solutions to offer. There are often barriers that make showing up more difficult and easier to just stay home. I'm hopeful there is a new generation and an 'older generation' (myself included) that are tearing down those barriers to have a voice and be heard. I also believe that you are here because you want to hear those ideas.

Speaking to you here today is not easy or natural, but in spite of my anxieties, I feel compelled to be here and hope it has some impact on each of you that results in gains for EKY. I asked Martin Richards, Executive Director of Community Farm Alliance several times for guidance and direction, he was patient and encouraging, but basically said, "It's my story and I just need to tell it! Thank you Martin for that permission and validation.

So, who am I? Why am I here today? I'm a pretty simple person. I was born in Whitesburg, KY about the time the War on Poverty began, I'm still there and so is the poverty. We may have won some battles, but we surely haven't won the war. I don't know all the statistics, but I live and see the

realities. Three personal examples of events in the past few days at my home as I've carried this hearing w/me that have resonated. I came yesterday evening and there was a 'stranger w/a camera' in my garden and field. I pride myself on knowing most folks, so I was concerned when I didn't recognize this gentleman. As it turns out, he wanted a picture of our barn. It was all fine, but I physically felt those defenses rising in me, Why are you here? Why taking pictures? We don't want to be "viewed and studied" as if we are different from you or others. We really aren't that different. Another example, I live close to the road, and have been having work done in an old basement, old water heaters, pipes, etc. have come out. No less than ten people, (most I don't know) have stopped to ask if they could have the scrap metal. Folks drive around w/eyes open scouring ditch lines and apparently drive ways looking for a means to make a dollar, when job opportunities are not available. Lastly, I had some work done from a gentleman and when I paid him, he shared how grateful he was. His wife had changed jobs, he wasn't working and they are having a hard time. He shared they had bought groceries w/\$20 and the family of six had had lunch on it and was proud to say they would have it again when they got home. I know meals can be made inexpensively, so that is not the biggest hardship of a \$10 meal for six, but it can't be easy day after day. So, that's a little snapshot of home. There are definitely brighter stories, and I'm happy to share those also, but these stories are common and a reality for many.

So, what's my story? Recently, I was quoted in an article as saying, "the elite make decisions, w/out asking the common folks." I probably said it, if they say I did, but it didn't sound like me, mainly because I actually consider myself the elite, or at least the "lucky." I have what I need, and life is still hard, I still make poor choices and daily I imagine how hard making the right decision and affording to do the right thing is for so many in EKY. Decisions as simple as what to eat become difficult choices. A dedicated elderly member of our Community group moved out of her home into the home w/her daughter, because as she put it, her choice was "heat or eat." She didn't want to ask for SNAP benefits because she thought others needed it more. I work at the Letcher County Food Pantry on some Monday afternoons. Over 600 families come in each month for their box, (roughly the size of a case of paper) of food. I hear them ask, "Do we have any fresh vegetables?" I see their excitement when fresh vegetables are there, excited to take a five pound bag of potatoes home or cabbage head. I see mothers or grandmothers excited when a cake mix is in the box at just the time she needs it for a child's birthday. I know and see the stereotypes and judgment of people taking undeservedly and men being bashed for waiting in the car for their "women" to get the box. However, I cannot believe there is anything in that box that is worth the low feeling of coming in to strangers, presenting your ID, checking addresses and last visit that is worth having if you weren't HUNGRY. I have seen people go straight to their cars and begin eating.

I serve as Coordinator for the Grow Appalachia program at Cowan Community Center, recently we did a survey of participants as to whether this program could help in decreasing SNAP benefits. Our results varied, but most believed it could/should. One of the questions I had to ask was whether they received benefits or not. One lady who takes care of her elderly Mother ashamedly said she did. She receives \$19 per month. I didn't quite know what to say, and humor is my default, so I said, "Oh, I see, you are the one who is holding our Country back." We laughed. I also tried to make sure she had plenty jars for canning her garden produce this summer.

Before I became involved w/Grow Appalachia and Community Farm Alliance, I was an Elementary Counselor. I retired to become involved with other issues. In Letcher County the Free/Reduced rate is high enough that our entire district receives free meals at school. I was pleased to learn that our district now offers an after school supper for students staying after school for activities. Some of our schools participate in the fruit and vegetable program and offer a healthy snack each day. Thank you for supporting those programs. They matter! As a school counselor near the front office, I saw kids come in late and often it would fall to me to check them in and take them back to their room. Their first instinct would be to head to the cafeteria, just as your children might get up and head to the breakfast table. We would go to the cafeteria and have breakfast. I worked with the backpack program, in our elementary school w/400 students over 70 were taking home backpacks w/food for the weekend. The food is primarily provided by local churches or organizations. The ideal is that the food be something they can open and eat. Not always the healthiest choice, but food. On Friday afternoons, children that would normally not lift their eyes off the floor through the week would come by in the afternoon if it was getting late and you'd feel a little peck, "where's my backpack?" One kindergarten boy, put a lock on his backpack and carried it back and forth through the week. That is an example of food insecurities at a primary level. Although, the school systems are doing much to provide meals, there is still ample room to grow in providing more locally sourced produce.

My work with Grow Appalachia, funded by John Paul DeJoria and administered through Berea College with David Cooke as Director began as a community project and has grown for the past three years to working w/70 families. Part of the beauty of this program is that is not based on income, but desire to grow and sell healthier food. Our community works together, rich or poor, we're all in it together. Harvest reports for August yielded over 50,000 lbs. of fresh produce and growing. My brother, Marshall, a skeptic/realist, doubted that total and said that was as much as a coal truck. That image has stayed with me, and I love the visual of a coal truck full of fruits and vegetables. We want the roads covered w/them....AND we want them refrigerated. Grow Appalachia, provides resources for families wishing to grow their own gardens for personal meals and for personal income. Grow Appalachia provides tilling services, cash for crops, seeds, supplies, classes in best practices and food preservation workshops. We had a series of canning classes and canned over 2000 jars of canned goods this summer. Workshops had an average of twenty participants at each session. Ten participants have completed or in the process of receiving Microprocessing Certification. At the time they began, KY had less than 100 certified Microprocessors and now Letcher County and Cowan Creek Canners are ten of that number. See me later for Granny Val's Pepper Jelly.

A large portion of my work with Community Farm Alliance is as Project Director for a National Institute of Health grant, Appalachians Together Restoring the Eating Environment (Appal-TREE.) This is a University of KY and CFA Community based research project to improve access and better nutrition choices. This partnership w/CFA was natural as not much leads to better food choices than walking into your garden and picking a vegetable. Dr. Mark Swanson and Dr. Nancy Schoenberg are Primary and Co Investigators for this project. When reaching out to Mark Swanson for direction on today, his comments were that although EKY does lead the statistics for poor health, they are not drastically poorer than the rest of the state. His thoughts were that EKY can tackle these health problems first and become an example for the state. Provide us resources to tackle these problems and find solutions that can be implemented in other communities. We can be a part of the problem and still be part of

the solution. Perhaps we are the only people who can solve our problems. But, that doesn't mean without help and support.

We did just that this summer. With the support of Community Farm Alliance, Grow Appalachia, KY Dept. of Ed. and local support, our Letcher County Farmers Market shined this summer. Through meeting with the East KY Food System Collaborative we learned of an idea to promote food/nutrition and farmers at the Farmers Market. We were the first in the state and only recently learned the second in the nation to serve as a Summer Feeding Site. We partnered w/the Letcher County School System to provide fresh, local meals to children for free this summer and inexpensive for adults. Children ate summer smoothies, w/fresh fruits and yogurt and breakfast wraps w/local eggs, fresh meat and veggies. One grower was a ten year old student selling his produce to the school system and school cafeteria staff made a meal. Our numbers grew to 73 meals served on the best day. With the support of CFA's Double Dollars program and WIC Vouchers, families were making the trip to the market on Saturday and making an event of the morning. Again, I don't have the statistics, but I don't 'think' kids regularly have yogurt smoothies at home. They loved it! When school started back, the Summer Feeding program had to end. That didn't feel right. We had worked so hard to get our numbers up and to let it end or begin charging for the food didn't feel like the right thing to do. Was our market about numbers and programs or children having fresh meals? I'm not the best planner, so when Saturday morning came around, we had no plan, but we knew we wanted to continue. We purchased the supplies we needed, including equipment and opened for business as usual, free for kids. Within the hour, Mike Caudill, CEO of Mountain Comprehensive Health Clinic and supporter of the market came by and shared that MCHC would sponsor the booth for the rest of the season. Kids continued to have free meals. Thank you to Health organizations that not only pass out pamphlets about proper food choices, but pass out the healthy food choices as well. Through this successful partnership, we are forging new alliances w/Mountain Comprehensive Health and together brainstorming w/our community to find creative means to promote and enable healthy food choices.

As the smoothies and breakfast wraps fed children who were hungry and sent a message to all children that adults care about them and want to support them in making healthy food choices, the success of the program fed our community. To be the first in the state, the nation we believed for a while was encouraging to all. To be a market that accepted WIC and SNAP benefits, offered double dollars was exciting. We were only lacking Senior Vouchers, due to a lack of funding, please support that program to be able to include new markets. We usually aren't ahead of the curve. To be noticed and held up as a model program lifted all our spirits. It was simple, actually very simple in the details, but the notion that we were getting attention for doing something new and novel in solving our problems was empowering, not only for the market, but our community. Folks are doing great things in the Mountains, they just don't all have an organization like CFA shining the spotlight on them. We can do more, so many people are willing to try, we just need support, which often comes down to money, but not always.

I, along with many others are consumed with this notion that Agriculture and all that comes with that is at the heart of Shaping Our Appalachian Region. I go to sleep thinking of what's next and wake up thinking of what needs to happen today. Agriculture, food/nutrition is at the core of being healthy. Working the land is healing, we own the fruit/vegetable rights, it's our chance to make it work and profit from it. The Country is going to need our food and workforce soon and this time, we want to be the folks who profit from the labor and resources and get healthy while we do it. Our community has

retired or disabled miners as growers, growers having to choose, do I go to the drill to work and leave home or can I get crops out and try this. Some are doing both and waiting for their jobs to end.

One time in my life, I have felt this level of intensity that we were at a tipping point, when my husband, Greg Horn, a coal miner was on strike against South East Coal Company. Probably my last official trip to Frankfort in 1990. That didn't end well, but we never regretted trying. The company closed, he had to leave home for work and was killed in a work accident in 1997. He would be proud of this work.

I'm often surrounded by excited youth, like Hilary Neff, an Oberlin graduate establishing her own foundation, Mountain Garden Initiative to promote agriculture and/or one and the same, food/nutrition choices in EKY. Whitesburg has a creative art scene, Appalshop, the lively Summit City and we seem to be a mecca for excited young youth. So many good things are happening in Whitesburg, we will make it. I love that they are here, add their perspective and hope they stay, but want to cultivate our local youth as well. As much as I love that enthusiasm and their shiny and bright smiles, it is discouraging on market day to see them there ready to help set up tents and contrast to the line with so many of our youth waiting at the pain clinic across the bridge from the Farmers Market. I can't believe they were born that differently with such different destinies prewired. We have to find meaningful ways to support our youth and help them see a brighter future.

I am becoming more mindful of my age, but in my almost fifty years, some would say they have never seen a darker time for EKY, I would say I have never seen a more opportune time for EKY. I say that with respect and sadness for those that have either had to leave to survive or are facing struggles daily here. I realize, I cannot tell their story and do not want to be seen as disrespecting their reality, but I see new and shared energy, creative ideas, talent, redefinition of success which includes hard work, sacrifice leading to self-autonomy, sufficiency, awareness, the list goes on.

Having served on the Agriculture working committee for SOAR, I know that group took their task seriously, and heard stories across EKY of success and more importantly a vision for what that could look like short term and long term. Letcher County is one of the Counties in the Promise Zone, living here, it feels like promises need to be kept. That we have waited patiently or impatiently, but it feels like our turn now.

I see a future for my children, Callie and Grant in EKY. My two year old granddaughter, Eliza Jane is the sixth generation to pick peppers from the same garden and I believe she can have a healthy future here in EKY if that's her choice. Invest in an economy that creates health as well as wealth.

Lastly, I invite each/everyone of you to EKY for a tour of the good things happening and the realities of the issues we face. Begin your tour in Whitesburg and see what EKY is about. If we work together, invest wisely, make adjustments as needed, be open to new ideas, resist stereotypes of EKY, I believe we can lead the way to a healthy economy and a healthy people, often one and the same.

Thank YOU