

We made a *difference*

'I'm fighting to save the environment'

Making the world a greener place doesn't require heroic effort. These women are tackling it one patch of land at a time *By Michelle Hainer*

"Growing up on a farm helped me cultivate a strong love and respect for the land."

—Jill Morrison, 48,
Story, Wyo.

Jill Morrison's earliest memories are of riding around with her grandfather in his truck, feeding cattle and harvesting beets on her family's farm. At a young age, she learned what it means to make a living off the land.

Now she's helping others who depend on the land for their livelihood. Jill works for the Powder River Basin Resource Council, an organization dedicated to helping landowners protect their property when companies want to mine the lucrative elements below. Ranchers in the Powder River Basin, in Sheridan Wyo., own the land they work on, but corporations often own the rights to the what lies beneath—primarily coal bed methane, a form of natural gas.

The ranchers have little say when it comes to deciding how the companies will extract the minerals. As a result, after a company drills, ranchers say, what's often left is damaged hay meadows and water wells, making feeding

cattle and getting water to them—sometimes even getting water for the ranchers themselves—a real struggle.

Ranching itself is a full-time job, so fighting these companies isn't something most ranchers can devote much time or energy to. That's where Jill enters the picture. "My role is to plug people in," she says. She educates ranchers about their rights and helps them band together to fight for those rights.

Some might say Jill's success in the Powder River Basin has come from her compassion and ability to encourage citizens to speak up to government officials. But if you ask Jill, she'll tell you it comes from something she learned while riding in the truck with her grandfather at the age of 4: "I developed a sense of connection to the land, growing up on it—the sense of connection to a rural people, which is why I enjoy my work now," she says. "I'm working with a lot of rural people, people who are connected to the land."





Kathleen Michels turned this empty lot into a park for her neighborhood.

“I was trying to save a little plot of land and I ended up creating a community park.”

—Kathleen Michels, 48, Silver Spring, Md.

When Kathleen Michels and her family moved into their home in a Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C., 12 years ago, she planted wildflowers and shrubs indigenous to the area. The plants are aesthetically pleasing, but Kathleen also hoped the natural landscaping would help restore the 11-square-mile Sligo Creek watershed, in Montgomery County. In truth, she bought her home in part because Sligo Creek, which feeds into Maryland’s Anacostia River, runs through its backyard. Now, as one of many concerned citizens who formed the nonprofit organization Friends of Sligo Creek, in 2001, she is dedicated to restoring and maintaining the watershed.

As Kathleen searched her own yard for the perfect spot to plant Lady fern and cardinal flower, she couldn’t help but

notice a triangular lot of missed opportunity—about 70 by 100 feet—across the street. A developer once planned to construct a road on the stretch of land, but later chose a new location. The earth was left unable to yield anything other than weeds, says Kathleen. “They’d throw some grass seed on it, but it died.” In 1999, Kathleen approached the county with a plan to clean up the patch of land. In return she received a permit and a \$250 grant to do the work.

The money didn’t go far, so she dug into her own pockets to buy topsoil and plants. Neighbors helped and two local environmental groups that donated a fledgling stock of American Elms—a tree that was nearly wiped out by Dutch Elm disease 30 years ago—and a grant to install rain gardens, groups of moisture-absorbing plants that slow the flow of



water and draw it into the earth. Bit by bit, as Kathleen and about 10 of her neighbors replaced weeds with healthy vegetation, monarch butterflies began to gather, as did other neighbors, who came to help and enjoy the landscape. Now there are footpaths, benches and a butterfly habitat in the park, which is surrounded by a bamboo lattice fence. In 2003 Kathleen held a dedication ceremony for American Elm Park, a space that was once a weedy mess.

Though Kathleen is happy the natural landscaping contributes to the restoration of Sligo Creek, she’s happier to see people enjoying the area. “I’ve had people stop me and say, ‘Do you know who takes care of that park? I walk by it all the time and love it,’” she says. “We made this and people are using it.”



Judy Bonds, holding papers, marched with the CRMW in May 2005.

“A fight for my own land turned into a fight to save a mountain range.”

—Judy Bonds, 55, Rock Creek, W.V.

Marfork Hollow, W.V., has been home to Judy Bonds’ family for generations. It’s where her father, grandfather, brother and ex-husband all worked as coal miners. It’s where she raised her only daughter and played with her grandson. But in 2001 Judy and her family moved from the town that ran deep through its history. She believes this was the only way to save themselves.

Judy became worried in 1997, when she noticed dead fish in a stream her grandson was wading in near her home. This concern nagged in the back of her mind and turned into dread a year later, when she saw a “white gooey substance” in the same waterway and found out that a sludge dam, meant to contain about 9 billion gallons of chemical waste created during the coal mining process, was being constructed about three miles upstream from her home. She says she called the West Virginia Division of Environmental Protection, but the construction of the sludge dam continued.

A few months later, Julia attended a meeting of an environmental protection group called the Coal River Mountain Watch (CRMW). With the help

of the CRMW, Judy requested a hearing, where she argued against the mining company’s appeal for a permit to enlarge the sludge dam.

Judy finally decided she wasn’t willing to risk her safety to stay in Marfork Hollow and fight. “Every time it rained, I worried,” says Judy. “If something would have happened to that dam, it would have wiped out my whole family.” Four years later, Judy moved 13 miles upstream, to the neighboring town of Rock Creek. By that time, she had already traded in her job as a convenience store clerk for employment with the CRMW. Now she goes head-to-head against the coal mining industry daily.

CRMW’s focus is mountain-top-removal mining, which involves removing summits to reveal the coal underneath. It’s cheaper than traditional mining, but Judy and CRMW argue that it decimates forests, destroys ecosystems and causes flooding.

In her position at CRMW, Judy is working to change the language of the Clean Water

Judy Bonds (above, holding papers) marched with the CRMW outside a coal processing plant in May 2005. She works to save the land she grew up near, like Kayford Mountain, right.



Act to make it illegal to dump industrial waste into rivers and streams. She’s also working to stop a coal mining company in the area from constructing a silo that would house waste near an elementary school.

Her work isn’t easy: She puts in 90 hours a week for a salary of only \$26,000 a year. In 2003, Judy won the Goldman Environmental Prize, the

world’s largest award honoring grassroots environmentalists. (She donated almost \$50,000 of the \$125,000 prize to CRMW.) But the biggest payoff for Judy would be for the mountain tops and people of her homeland to be allowed to thrive. “As I pass by the mouth of Marfork Hollow on my way to work, I always feel such a sadness, and many times I cry,” she says.

Save the earth a little every day

Want to do your part to preserve the environment? Here are some simple steps you can take.

 **Buy efficient appliances.**

If you need a new appliance, look for the Energy Star (www.energystar.gov). It means the model meets Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Agency energy guidelines.

 **Use eco-friendly cleaners.**

Dodge harmful chemicals and contaminants with Holy Cow All-Purpose Cleaner (www.holycowproducts.com) or Seventh Generation (www.seventhgeneration.com).

 **Reuse bags, big or small.**

Save grocery bags, and bring them with you on your next trip to the store. Use them again instead of taking new ones at the checkout. Rinse ziplock bags and reuse them, too.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHUCK WYRSTOK (BONDS); COURTESY OF COAL RIVER MOUNTAIN WATCH (RALLY)