

## **A Visit to the New River Clinic** by Jane M. Martin

Come with me on a trip through the mountains of West Virginia, to a place I'll never forget. Following a time in Charlottesville, Virginia, at the Virginia Festival of the Book, a friend and I drove to Beckley, West Virginia to meet Betty Dotson-Lewis. Betty had been very helpful in acquainting me with a slice of the Appalachian culture by sharing coal mining stories in a book she was working on. From that first email we exchanged there was no doubt – I needed to meet her.

The weather on that March day was perfect, about 75 degrees and sunny, especially pleasant for two travelers from Michigan and Philadelphia. Betty had suggested we get together at Tamarack. She was sure we'd love it. Tamarack sits just outside Beckley and is the most marvelous experience in seeing, and shopping for, the best arts, crafts, books, and food, West Virginians have to offer.

Dressed all in red, from head to high heels, topped by wind-blown blond hair, Betty walked up and introduced herself with a smile. Over lunch my friend and I were captivated by her knowledge of all things Appalachian, as well as her fierce determination to share with the world *the stories and the spirit* of the Appalachian people. This spunky lady not only had a lot to say, but a whole lot of energy – and determination – to back it up!

Betty had arranged for the three of us to visit the New River Breathing Clinic. When we asked for directions, she said, "It's not far from here. Just follow me." We went north on US 19 and after about 20 miles made our exit at the sign reading, "Scarbro Loop - Dead End." We proceeded onto a winding, single-lane, partially gravel road. At the bottom of the hill we crossed the creek on a one-lane bridge, turned left and rumbled on for a few miles through an abandoned coal camp. Although the camp was no longer in use, there were still people living in Scarbro Loop. Small, wood-framed houses, lined the winding road, many in disrepair, inhabited by folks who had – maybe, or maybe not – seen better times. At Betty's direction we stopped at the Whipple Company Store, one of the last vestiges of the web of corruption that for so long enslaved the miners and their families who had once worked on this mountain. We snapped pictures of the neglected building listening as Betty told us about "scrip," the form of currency paid to the miners, accepted only at that coal company store.

Just a few minutes after we were back on the road, we turned into a small parking lot bedded with coarse gravel. There it was – the New River Breathing Clinic, an unassuming modular unit housing the center of health care for this underserved community. Once inside, Betty introduced us to nurse Brenda Halsey who offered to lead us on a tour. We paused at the small waiting room just inside the entrance to admire artwork done by coal miners. Paintings and poems expressing life underground reminded us once again how mining pervades all aspects of life for those in this region. As Brenda told us about the health center, we wound our way through corridors, past examination rooms and offices. Around each corner we found a friendly smile, a buzz of activity, and an air of hard work and satisfaction. The next waiting room we passed was packed. This place had no fancy furniture or wall coverings, no designer fabrics or custom trim. Why should it? It is, as it should be, a place to go for help from those who are not only experts in what they do, but most importantly, those who possess a deep commitment to improving the health and well-being of those in this mountain community.

Our tour was over. It was time to visit one more clinic and drive on yet that night to Charleston. We thanked Brenda for her hospitality and said, "So long" – but certainly not good-bye – to the clinic at Scarbro Loop.

You can learn more about the New River Clinic by clicking on

<http://www.umwa.org/journal/VOL11NO3/mayclinic.shtml>

and visit Tamarack by clicking here <http://www.tamarackwv.com/>

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