

**Lessons Learned Through Shared Experiences**  
*Women from Mining Communities in Guatemala*  
*Share Experiences with Women in SW Virginia*  
**by Susan Hedge**

On April 12, 2011 Victoria Cumes Jochola arrived at the SAMS (Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards) Office in Appalachia, VA exhausted from the 8-hour car trip from DC but eager to see a mountain top removal mining operation. Met by members of SAMS and escorted to the site where despite low visibility, rain and slippery conditions Victoria was able to view the result of mining operations in the Central Appalachian mountains. Back at the SAMS office the group logged onto Skype and conducted a three-hour meeting with five other women leaders in Guatemala. They shared stories and strategies, laughed and made a commitment to meet again.

Victoria came to the US on a speaking tour sponsored by NISGUA, Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala. Speaking from Boston to North Carolina in a marathon tour she explained the human rights violations being experienced at the hands of Goldcorp, a gold mining company headquartered in Canada. Goldcorp purchased land from her people in San Marcus with promises of employment, better living conditions, and education. Later when the residents realized that the land was now valued at much more than they were originally given and that none of the promises were forthcoming, they asked for more money in payment for their land. Water is scarce because the processing of the gold uses a lot of water. Strange skin rashes have appeared due to the pollutants found in the water. In addition, many of the homes suffer cracks in the walls and foundations since the mining explosions began. The resulting struggle continues.

Fifteen members of the U.S. Congress are urging Guatemalan President Colom to halt operations at the controversial Goldcorp Mine. In a March 30, 2011 letter to President Colom the representatives cited complaints from the Mayan indigenous communities that the mine had contaminated water and caused serious health problems. The experiences of the people in Guatemala run parallel to those experiences found in Central Appalachia with mountain top mining. They hold concerns for all people who are considering mining operations in their locale. One Guatemalan woman speaks directly to such people faced with the decision to allow mining in her community. We would like to advise those communities where mining operations are planned to start to make sure you avoid being fooled as we were in San Miguel. Oppose those mining operations before they initiate. We do not want others to go through what we are living here today, difficult times. As a result of last week's visit members of SAMS and Victoria recognize this parallel. Through sharing of story and solidarity they will draw strength from one another in their struggle for the rights of their people as well as their land.

Jaculyn Hanrahan, Director of the Appalachian Faith and Ecology Center and Susan Hedge, Ecological Educator were present at the NISGUA meeting in Appalachia and saw first hand how shared stories could strengthen and empower the work of environmental justice, to care for the Earth and its people. Everyone has an Appalachia. The AFEC is

dedicated to educating people of faith about the current issues impacting the ecological integrity of Central Appalachia and how those same concerns are experienced around the world. The work of the center will continue to connect people who are being marginalized by ecological degradation.

To learn more about NISGUA and the work with women in Guatemala visit <http://www.nisgua.org/> and [http://nisgua.org/get\\_involved/speakers\\_tour/Spring2011.asp](http://nisgua.org/get_involved/speakers_tour/Spring2011.asp).

To learn more about the Appalachian Faith and Ecology Center visit [www.appfaihtecolcenter.org](http://www.appfaihtecolcenter.org) and on Facebook , Appalachian & Ecology Group