

## **Discussion Guide**

### ***The Buffalo Creek Flood: An Act of Man & Buffalo Creek Revisited***

*NOTE: In all such discussions, it is important to keep folks focused on issues and not on personalities. If names need to be mentioned, it is important to not demonize individuals. What IS important is to understand why individuals acted as they did. Their jobs? Their connections? Their investments? Their political careers?*

#### **Before the Screening**

The group might want to locate the Appalachian region and the Buffalo Creek area on a map, and explore what they know about the region's terrain, history, economic base, and people.

The group could also discuss issues of energy consumption and explore their knowledge of the role of coal in meeting the nation's energy needs and the pros and cons of mining and using coal as an energy source.

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. What was your first reaction to the films?
  - Were there parts of the films that particularly affected you? Why?
2. One of the survivors interviewed says, "This is the most tragic thing I've seen in my life. I'm sorry that God let me live to see it."
  - After seeing the film what do you think it means to be a survivor? What did the Buffalo Creek survivors lose in terms of tangible and intangible things?
3. There's a familiar saying that goes: "Those who do not learn the lessons of history are bound to repeat the mistakes."
  - What were the lessons to be learned from the flood?
  - Who are the players who stood to learn from the disaster (the coal company, political leaders, government officials, coal miners, community leaders, etc.)?
  - Are there examples of changes that have been made to prevent disasters such as Buffalo Creek?
  - If changes have not been made, why do you think that is so?
4. What responsibilities, if any, do corporations that profit from mining coal have for preventing disasters such as Buffalo Creek?
  - What responsibilities, if any, do they have for the social, economic, or environmental well-being of coalfield communities?
  - What responsibilities, if any, do shareholders of these corporations have?
5. The films suggest that government agencies responsible for safety did not adequately do their jobs.
  - Why do you think that was so?
  - Are there current examples of government agencies failing to protect workers or the public?
  - What steps need to be taken to ensure that such agencies actually act in the public interest?

6. Some people argue that disasters such as Buffalo Creek and mining tragedies like Mannington and Sago are allowed to happen because people outside of Appalachia hold stereotypes of Appalachian people as ignorant and fatalistic hillbillies whose lives are worth less.

- Do you think negative images of West Virginians/Appalachians contribute to corporate negligence?
- To lack of a concerted national effort to reduce poverty or environmental degradation in the region?
- Are there examples of other ethnic or regional groups who could be seen as harmed by stereotypes?
- What can we do to change those images and perceptions?

7. Coal mining is a dangerous occupation and often destructive of the environment. Yet it has provided good paying jobs to many West Virginians. And, in a time of increasing oil prices, coal may be especially important to our economy and energy independence.

- How do we reconcile the apparent contradictions between environmental sustainability and energy needs?
- Is it possible to provide decent paying jobs and also protect the environment?
- In light of concerns about global warming, how important do you think it is to develop alternative and cleaner forms of energy?
- How might this affect the Appalachian coalfields?
- What types of industry could be developed if the region was less dependent on mining?

8. According to William Scott in *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, “the purpose of social documentary was to increase the public’s knowledge of facts, but also to sharpen that knowledge with feelings.”

- Do these films strike you as Social Documentaries? In what ways?
- Did the films change any of your beliefs or reinforce some of your current feelings?
- What role, if any, do you think documentaries or other media play in changing people’s point of view or attitudes?
- In what ways, if any, do documentaries or other media move people to take action? What different influences do you think motivate individuals to work for social change?

### **For Further Study:**

There is a growing national debate on the human and environmental impact that Mountain Top Removal Mining, a form of surface mining in which thousands of mountain acres have been flattened, is having on the Appalachian Mountains and possibly global climate changes. The Current Issues (link) section of this website lists resources for more information and action.

### **Tips for Discussion Leaders:**

**Handouts:** It’s a good idea to pass out any material before the beginning of a discussion. If material is passed out during a discussion, people tend to start reading and not pay attention to the discussion. Also, be very picky about what is handed out. If given too many pages, people will end up reading nothing. So select what you feel to be the most necessary pieces of paper. Also make sure to give websites and reading lists as part of the handouts so that people who want to get more information will be able to do so.

**Pointers:** Some people may feel deeply about this subject and/or have personal experiences with the flood or similar tragedies. These often become “testimonies” and may make a substantial contribution to the audience’s understanding. The discussion leader needs to make that assessment. Sometimes such testimonies end up being personal gripes, and need to be politely, but firmly, cut off.

It is also possible that different people may have opposing views and get into an argument. It is very important that the discussion leader move people away from arguing. One of the most effective ways to do this goes something like this:

*“It is clear Mr. X and Ms. Y have very different opinions on this question. We would like to hear from other people on this issue. We also need to explore WHY it is that people hold the opinions that they do and why they feel so strongly.”*