

West Virginia Public Broadcasting

Telling West Virginia's Story

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The Opioid Epidemic in Kermit, W.Va.

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As the opioid epidemic continues to kill people across the country, local governments are struggling to get a handle on the problem. More and more, states and municipalities are filing suit against pharmaceutical companies. That trend started right here, in the place that's known as the "epicenter" of the opioid crisis.

West Virginia deals with the highest overdose death rates in the country, and it was the first state to file suit against quote, "Big Pharma." About a year ago, McDowell was the first county, Huntington the first city and the tiny town of Kermit the first town to follow in state leaders' footsteps and file suit against pharmaceutical companies.

The hope is that a victory in these suits could provide money to help fund things like recovery centers, and more police.

Reporter Jessica Lilly visited Kermit to see how opioids have devastated the town, and why officials there are trying to recoup costs from out-of-state drug distributors.

The Opioid Epidemic in Kermit, W.Va.



Ground Zero

Kermit used to be a booming coal town. Named after Kermit Roosevelt, son of President Theodore Roosevelt, this town has also been called the “ground zero” for the opioid epidemic.

A [Pulitzer Prize winning report](#) in 2016 by Eric Eyre in the Charleston Gazette found that wholesaler pharmaceutical companies flooded Kermit with more than 12 million hydrocodone tablets between 2007 and 2012.

The ratio of pills to people is staggering: about 30,000 pills for each Kermit resident.

A medical office was shut down, and a pharmacy is under new ownership after the former operators spent time in jail for operating a so-called “pill mill” network.

Residents say things have slowed down. They don’t see as many out of state license plates. The pharmacy parking lot is not as full.

But people in Kermit are still struggling with the aftermath of the pills that flooded their town.

Last January Mayor Charles Sparks filed a lawsuit on behalf of the town of Kermit. The suit names four pharmaceutical companies, the West Virginia Board of Pharmacy, and the former owner of Justice Medical Clinic. The suit is seeking compensation for damages to the town, and better monitoring of pills entering the town by the Board of Pharmacy.

In 2016, the majority of overdose deaths in W.Va. involved opioids. The CDC reports that opioid overdose deaths were five times higher in 2016 than 1999.

A Different Town

Councilperson Tammy Hodge says the town has really changed.

“In a sense we died,” Hodge said. “It’s still a good town and it still have very, very good people in it, but it’s not the town that town that I grew up in.”

The fire station in Kermit serves this community, parts of Mingo County, and even parts of neighboring Wayne County. Wilburn Preece, the Kermit Volunteer Fire Chief. lost his brother, the assistant fire chief, four months ago to a drug overdose.

“I was the first one on the scene,” Preece said.

Preece’s brother, Timmy Dale Preece, was the youngest son in a family of 13 brothers and sisters. Preece says his brother saved many lives during his 54 years, but he ended up losing his own.

“I miss him more every day. Every call we get I was used to having him there by my side and I don’t have him now,” he said.

Timmy Dale had apparently relapsed. He had battled drugs before. Willburn says he was injured in a car accident when he was 14 and ended up doctor shopping for pain pills.

New Future?

After his brother died, Wilburn pushed to get the opioid overdose reversal medicine Naloxone at the Kermit Fire Station. While Naloxone wouldn't have saved his brother, Wilburn hopes he could save someone else's life.

In just six weeks, Preece said he administered three doses and saved three lives.

Preece says the lawsuit filed by Mayor Charles Sparks on behalf of the town of Kermit has brought new hope to folks in the region.

Wilburn's hope is that the fire department has enough money to continue to stock Naloxone, and maybe to build a recovery center close by. He would also like to see a new community center for the kids.

He says these investments would show they aren't giving up on their town or their children's future.

During a federal hearing in Cleveland earlier this month, Judge Dan Polster argued that the crisis is "100 percent man made." He said he believes everyone from drug-makers to doctors, and even individuals share some responsibility for the crisis and haven't done enough to stop it. The judge also urged participants in lawsuits against drug-makers and distributors to work toward a common goal of reducing overdose deaths.

We reached out to the defendants in the Kermit lawsuit.

- *Laurie K. Miller from the Jackson and Kelly law firm, representing Miami-Luken, wrote back to say in part ... "Miami-Luken is aware of the allegations made in the Kermit case and plans to vigorously defend itself in that litigation. Because this litigation is on-going, Miami-Luken cannot comment further on the matter."*
- *Justin C. Taylor with the Bailey and Wyant law firm representing the W.Va. Board of Pharmacy said, "Unfortunately, because this matter is in litigation and with the W.Va. Board of Pharmacy named as a defendant in numerous lawsuits, I cannot comment or give an interview. Furthermore, the W.Va.*

Board of Pharmacy also cannot give any statements or be available for interviews at this time due to the ongoing litigation.”

- *Cardinal Health said, “The people of Cardinal Health care deeply about the devastation opioid abuse has caused American families and communities and are committed to helping solve this complex national public health crisis. ... We operate as part of a multi-faceted and highly regulated healthcare system – we do not promote or prescribe prescription medications to members of the public – and believe everyone in that chain, including us, must do their part, which is ultimately why we believe these copycat lawsuits filed against us are misguided, and do nothing to stem the crisis. We will defend ourselves vigorously in court and at the same time continue to work, alongside regulators, manufacturers, doctors, pharmacists and patients, to fight opioid abuse and addiction.”*
- *And McKesson Corporation said in part “...This complicated, multi-faceted public health crisis cannot be solved by any one participant. It needs to be addressed through a comprehensive approach that includes the doctors, patients, pharmacists, insurance companies, government payers (such as Medicaid and Medicare), distributors, manufacturers, law enforcement and regulators.”*
- *AmerisourceBergen said in part “...Beyond our reporting and immediate halting of tens of thousands of potentially suspicious orders, we refuse service to customers we deem as a diversion risk and provide daily reports to the DEA that detail the quantity, type, and the receiving pharmacy of every single order of these products that we distribute.”*

Jessica Lilly / January 19, 2018 / WVPB News / Health & Science, The Damage Done - West Virginia's Opioid Epidemic, WVPB News

West Virginia's FILMmaker of the Year Likes it Behind the Scenes

This year's West Virginia FILMmaker of the Year is a Pittsburgh native who hails from West Virginia these days. Here at West Virginia Public Broadcasting we know [Larry Dowling](#) as the Production Manager but he's also a videographer, lighting designer, grip, gaffer, director, and just about anything else you could think of in filmmaking. This year, he can add [West Virginia Filmmaker](#) of the Year to that list.

Along with his work with public broadcasting, Larry has also worked on films like *Ashes to Glory*, *Frank Kearns: American Correspondent*, *Coal Country* and has worked with almost every network out there including the Travel Channel, and ESPN.

Dowling says the best documentary that he's ever worked on is, *The Mine Wars by American Experience*.

He recently worked on a film called *Backfork*, and just finished shooting a horror film called *The Conduit*. Dowling says one of the highlights of this past year was working on a movie called *What the Night Can Do*. It's a personal journey about the trials of love, loss and reconnection in this coming of age story that centers around 12-year old girl who visits her ailing grandfather, "Hugh," in the hills of West Virginia. It's expected to be released sometime this year.

You can hear this interview and more about filmmaking in Appalachia on an upcoming episode of [Inside Appalachia](#). Just click the red button below to subscribe to podcast.

Jessica Lilly / October 19, 2017 / WVPB News / Arts & Culture, Filmmaker, WV FILMmaker Festival, WV Filmmaker of the Year, WVPB News

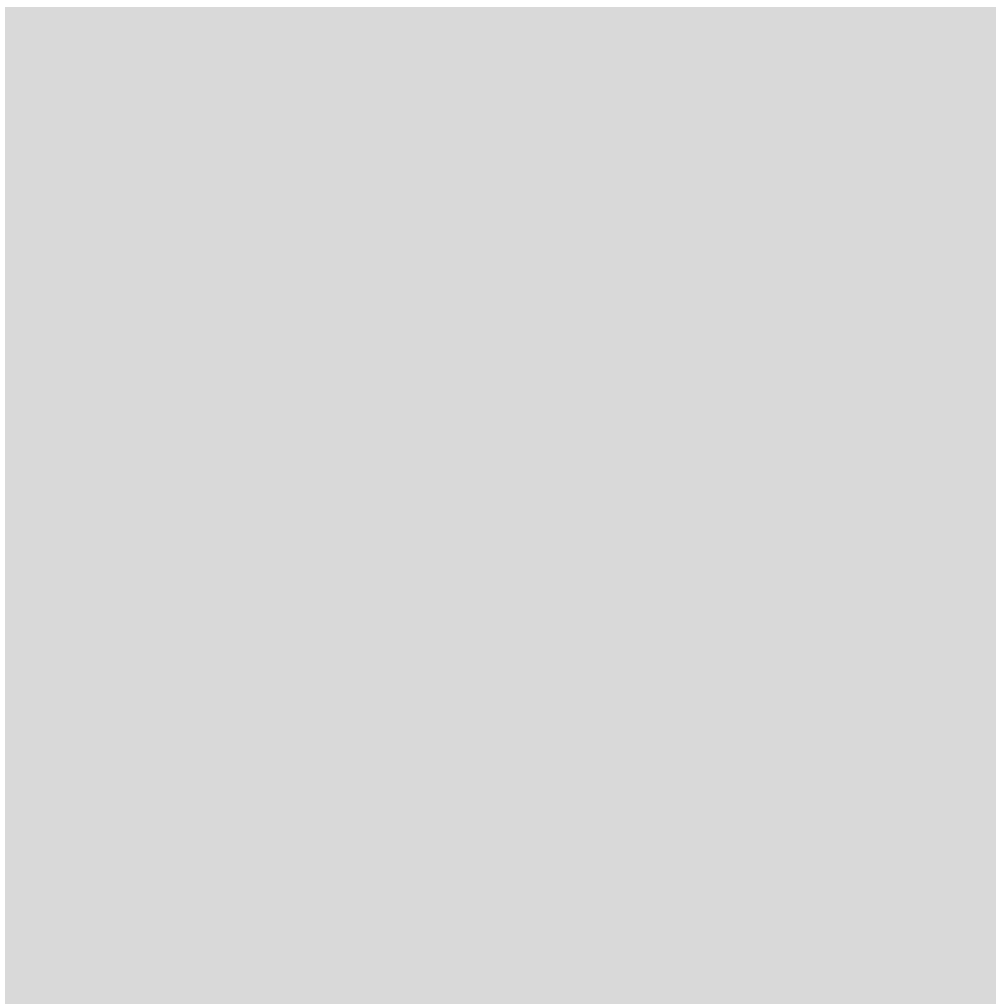
Lilly, W.Va.: The Town Swept Away by 'Progress'

For communities in the rugged Appalachian Mountains – when it rains hard, water doesn't have anywhere to go but straight down into the hollers. Floods – especially flash floods – are simply a way of life. In fact, our region has experienced [some of the largest measured flash flood](#) events in the world.

Over the years, the federal government has tried to build dams to help prevent some of these floods. Several communities have been impacted by the construction of these dams including the people who lived in the village of Lilly back in the 1940s.

Years ago, families lined the banks where the Bluestone and Little Bluestone meet. There was a schoolhouse, a church, among houses and other buildings; but not anymore. The federal government told the residents at the village of Lilly they had to make room for a new dam a few miles upstream so it could protect other communities from flooding.

Come to find out, the land wasn't even flooded. Now, it's the property of the National Park Service.



Credit Roxy Todd

/

Inside Appalachia host, Jessica Lilly, interviewing Dave Bieri with the National Park Service.

Dave Bieri with the National Park Service says, most of the families who lived here were subsistence farmers. They lived off the land and grew most of their food themselves. Apparently, this land along the river was pretty good farmland. Legend has it that the Lillys arrived here with just an ax, a gun, and a bible.

“I can’t imagine what it would have been like to come down here in the late 1700s,” Dave said while he guided the tour. “This area was the frontier. Back then it was really a wilderness. You had to be pretty resourceful to survive back then.”

Even before the Lillys came here, the path was used by Native Americans for possibly thousands of years.

“Thousands of years ago people were wandering through here, and this was the same route they took,” Dave said. “So you’re walking in the footsteps of a whole lot of people before us.”

Dave says there was likely some fighting between white settlers and the natives but by the time the Lillys got here, most of the Native Americans who used this land for hunting had already been pushed into other territories.

The residents of Lilly were compensated for the land they were forced to give up. In 1947, a newspaper in Beckley reported that one farmer was paid \$1,750 for his property, which would be comparable to about thirty thousand dollars today.

Still, the residents at the village of Lilly were upset for several reasons. They were disturbed by how the federal government treated the remains from their ancient cemetery when it was relocated.

At the Lilly-Crews cemetery there are rows of unmarked graves with simple sticks and tiny metal rectangles that only identified the remains with a number. As for the village itself, there’s hardly a trace left at all.

Dave says when the Lilly’s were pushed off the land, they weren’t allowed back. Not even to pick the apples they planted.

“There were orchards down here, with apple trees, and they said when the government came in and told them they had to leave,” Dave said. “One of the things they were really upset about was these apple trees that still had apples on them that weren’t being harvested.”

There’s pretty much no trace of the people who lived here more than 70 years ago. But sometimes, in the springtime, Dave says he does see daffodils growing here in the middle of the forest.

Many of the Lillys and other families who lived in the village moved to Raleigh or Wyoming counties.

Basically, the only other remnant of the town... is a church. Of course, the building no longer stands along the river, but the church, well it still has an active congregation and faithful attendance.

The village of Lilly is no longer standing, and the homes were not preserved by the government, but the Lilly family has worked to preserve an impressive amount of family records and history. The family even organizes a family reunion that grew into the largest family reunion in the world, according to the Guinness Book of World Records.

So why was the land never actually flooded? According to historians, the engineers miscalculated.

Jessica Lilly / October 17, 2017 / WVPB News / Arts & Culture, Bluestone Dam, National Park Service, Village of Lilly, WVPB News

Avian Conservationist Hopes to Inspire Next Generation with Children's Book

Author Katie Fallon was inspired, in part, by her own children to write the book, [*Look, See the Bird!*](#) In the book, Fallon writes about children from different parts of the world. It's an imaginary trip across parts of the world, and the perspectives of migratory birds help guide the story.

Fallon is a board member with the Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia, a non-profit group that's dedicated to preserving the region's wild birds. She's currently teaching non-fiction writing classes at West Virginia Wesleyan College.



She recently released a book called [*VULTURE: The Private Life of an Unloved Bird*](#). West Virginia Public Broadcasting last spoke with Katie in 2011 after she released [*CERULEAN BLUES: A Personal Search for a Vanishing Songbird*](#).

In this interview, Inside Appalachia host Jessica Lilly talk with Katie about the book she co-authored called, [Look, See the Bird!](#)

The children's book shares voices from kids observing birds in different countries. It also includes a scene from Cooper's Rock in West Virginia that was inspired by an actual visit with her own children.

"So Cooper's Rock State Forest is right up the road from us where we live outside of Morgantown," Fallon said. "So we go to Cooper's Rock very very often especially in the fall in the summertime. And when you sit at the overlook and watch that cheat river far below there are often Broadway hawks that fly just off the overlook."

Fallon says she wanted to encourage children to observe birds because birds often go overlooked and it's a great way to get outside.

"I think that sometimes in our everyday lives we forget that we are part of an ecosystem also," Fallon said. "We're not just you know walking around looking at our phones we're participating in an ecosystem with everything we do. And I think that birds can help connect us to that."

By including characters that are from different countries, the book introduces different cultures to children.

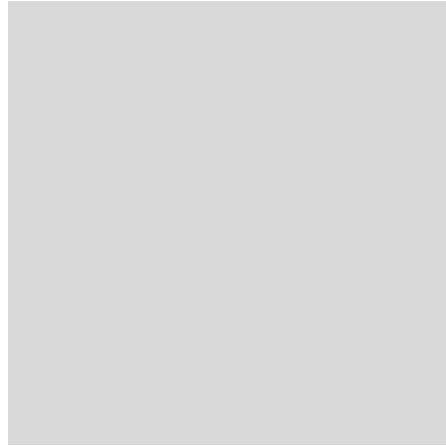
"We wanted to show that birds are really the connection between kids from different cultures kids who speak different languages, kids who might never get to meet each other in real life," Katie said.

Fallon also wanted to raise awareness about the rare birds in West Virginia.

"Cerulean warbler is the fastest declining songbird in North America and we have a lot of them here in West Virginia," she said. "We have more breadings and warblers than any other state. Cerulean spend the winters on coffee farms. They use coffee farms in Central America during migration and then some of them end up spending the winter on coffee farms in Colombia and Venezuela. Unfortunately since the 70's a lot of primary forests in the tropics has been cut down to make way for coffee."

Katies says she hopes the book sparks an interest in conservation, migration and culture for children.

This interview was part of the [Inside Appalachia](#) podcast in an episode called [Hidden Gems Inside Appalachia](#).



Jessica Lilly / September 2, 2017 / WVPB News / Arts & Culture, Avian Conservation, Child literacy, Children's Books, Inside Appalachia, WVPB News

Author of 'The Glass Castle' Wants New Movie to Give Hope

Best selling author Jeannette Walls spent most of her childhood west of the Mississippi River but her father eventually brought her family back to McDowell County where she lived for four years. She wrote about her time growing up in extreme poverty across the country in her memoir, “The Glass Castle.” The book has been on the New York Times best selling list for more than 7 years and the movie is now out in theatres. Inside Appalachia host, Jessica Lilly spoke with Walls a few days before the movie hit theatres.

Jessica Lilly / August 30, 2017 / WVPB News / Arts & Culture, Jeannette Walls, poverty, The Glass Castle, WVPB News

10 Years of Collaborative Higher Education Celebrated in Southern W.Va.

It's been 10 years since [The Erma Byrd Center](#) opened in Raleigh County. State officials, students, faculty and community members gathered at the Center on Friday to celebrate the anniversary.

The Erma Byrd Center, was West Virginia's first collaborative higher education campus. The Center offers classes and student services from [Bluefield State College](#), [Concord University](#) and [Marshall University](#).

According to a [news release](#) from the [Higher Education Policy Commission](#), a variety of state and college officials attended the event including HEPC Chancellor, Paul Hill.

"Ten years ago, the Erma Byrd Higher Education Center launched with the groundbreaking goal of uniting the colleges and universities serving southern West Virginia in order to increase efficiency and better meet the needs of our communities," Dr. Hill said. "Today, the Center stands as the cornerstone to a vibrant campus featuring multiple facilities and offering classes to more than 1,000 students. The Center has become a hub to fuel innovation, promote economic development and expand access to higher education opportunities throughout the region."

A news release says more than 1,100 students are enrolled to attend the complex for the upcoming Fall 2017 semester. The Complex offers degree programs in a variety of fields.

Students attending the event were eligible to apply for more than \$30,000 in scholarships. Bluefield State, Concord and the Higher Education Foundation each offered ten \$1,000 scholarships in recognition of the ten-year anniversary.

Officials also gathered items for a time capsule with plans to open it on the Center's 20th anniversary.

For more information about the programs, classes and resources offered at the center, [here](#).

Jessica Lilly / August 4, 2017 / WVPB News / Bluefield State College, Concord University, Education, Government, Higher Education, Higher Education Policy Commission, Marshall University, WVPB News

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