

THIS SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN

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Chad Berry, the director of the Appalachian Center here at Berea College where I work, reacted to the recent ABC News “20/20” program, “Children of Appalachia,” with exasperation. “It’s so cliché,” he said. “The network focuses on the most heart-wrenching stories which put the region in the worst light, and then, of course, the ‘stereotype police’ come out of the corners and assault the network, and this just happens over and over again.” Good point, Chad.

Our friend, Ron Eller, the former director of the University of Kentucky Appalachian Center, who appeared on the television program, recognizes the pattern. He does think, however, that this particular program has engendered more productive discussion than most. Ron also put his finger on perhaps the key to understanding the discouraging cycle that Chad bemoans: Diane Sawyer, like most Americans, cannot get past the individual stories. She simply doesn’t highlight the social problems and their causes and their policy implications. The program was near-sighted, more like 20/200 than 20/20, focusing only on individual drama, not the need for collective solutions. Viewers ended up sending money to buy Courtney some Hannah Montana boots that are made in China and that have a history of being recalled by our government’s Consumer Product Safety Commission! Talk about exacerbating problems instead of solving them.

Those of us who have lived in mountain communities know that when outsider agencies or the government picks out particular people to give stuff to, it can cause severe problems. As a father of seven, I know first hand many of the difficulties caused by what can easily be viewed as unfair distribution of limited resources. When one family in a neighborhood gets “manna from heaven,” it tends to affect the attitudes of others and weaken the resolve of the whole community to work together to address its problems.

Hazard Mayor Bill Gorman called the program “the same load of crap they’ve been doing the last 40 years.” But politicians denying the

existence of problems in our region and refusing to deal with them is a regional plague that is all too familiar. Jim Matney, the coach of Shawn Grim, the football player featured in the television program, admitted, "I think it is even worse than what they portrayed," but he lamented the fact that the program didn't depict ways that local people are working to solve the very real problems. A letter drafted by the sectional editors of the *Encyclopedia of Appalachia* also focused on a plea for the media to depict the positive attributes of the region and the good role models it has produced. That is all well and good, but what is really needed are solutions to the problems.

Yes, our region has a severe problem with bad dental hygiene. We also have a problem—not even addressed by Diane Sawyer—with obesity. Yes, one of the big reasons for this is the consumption of soda pop. This can be viewed both as an individual and as a cultural problem. However, this is also a problem of corporate irresponsibility and bad government policy as well. Mike Mullins, the Director of the Hindman Settlement School in Knott County, Kentucky, has for years forbidden soda pop on the grounds of his school. All public and private schools should do the same. I'd even go so far as to advocate that federal aid to education should be contingent upon soft drink bans. Soft drinks, like alcoholic beverages, should have excise taxes, and they should definitely not be purchasable with food stamps. Clearly the cans and bottles they come in should feature rewards for recycling. And the soft-drink corporations should promote their juices and their bottled water fervently and refrain from advertising their products containing the most caffeine and high-fructose corn syrup.

Of course, Diane Sawyer apparently didn't even realize that meth is much more destructive of teeth than Mountain Dew. The problems of our region need to be dealt with as social problems with policy solutions, not exclusively as a pity party for individuals or as the result of a defective culture.

In their next meeting after the "20/20" show, the Harlan County School Board spent more than an hour discussing what could be done to help kids like those depicted on the program. That's an indication that perhaps some good really can come of all the discussion this program has stimulated.