

# The Coalminer's Healing Daughter



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**T**he Coal Fields of Eastern Kentucky” is what she calls her hometown. The natives call it Hemphill. The United States Post Office calls it Jackhorn. Regardless of the name, one thing was certain about this place: mining was the way of life.

Her family and all the mining families lived in coal camps, which consisted of a row of houses built and owned by the coal companies. In the '60s and '70s, “union vs. corporate” became the community conflict due to the unhealthy conditions of the mines and the company's unjust treatment of the miners. The men in her family were union through and through, and they did everything in their power to get the rights they deserved.

“The rebellion against the company and the rebellion against the authorities really set the tone for children raised up in the aftermath of the last bloody strike in Letcher County,” Gwen Johnson (HAS '05) says.

Gwen lost three uncles and her only brother, Rex, to mining accidents. But it was the only life she knew then.

It was this tumultuous setting—with mining conflicts, poverty and struggle in every direction—that laid the path Gwen would follow, one that would eventually lead her back to her Kentucky roots. Today she spends her days helping others with their struggles as a community activist, a counselor and a teacher. And while her path led her away from her faith in God, she found it again at Goddard. Through her explorations in the Health Arts and Sciences Program, Gwen came to embrace Christianity as an integral part of her work.

## BREAKING AWAY FROM HER ROOTS

Gwen grew up surrounded by rebellion, poverty and illness. Rooted in the ways of her father's mother, she wanted so desperately to help people, to heal people like her grandmother did. Her grandmother shunned doctors and instead healed by way of home remedies and herbs. She was the

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woman Gwen wanted to emulate.

But the ways of the people in rural Kentucky didn't allow her to do much but find a breadwinning husband at a young age and hope for the best. She married her first husband when she was just a junior in high school, but they soon divorced. Gwen married again when she was 20 and stayed with her second husband for 17 years, until her eldest daughter, Hannah, decided to go to college. Gwen decided that it was time for her to go back to school, too.

“I had been helping people write papers for school for years,” Gwen says. “I guess I decided that it was time for me, then.”

Her coalminer husband saw no need to spend money he didn't have on two women going to college, so Gwen packed her bags, left with her two daughters and got a job for minimum wage. With financial aid, both mother and daughter finally began their journeys.

Gwen had always wanted to be a nurse midwife, and to do this she had to be a registered nurse (RN). She started taking general courses at Southeastern Community College and was later accepted into an RN program. This study, however, did not last long.

“When I got into clinicals is when I realized that ... I would've died had I finished that RN,” she says. Because of the convictions instilled in her by her grandmother, Gwen was terribly bothered by the things she had to see. At one

As a girl, Gwen Johnson lived in a coal camp like the one pictured above. The camps housed the miners and their families but were owned by the mining companies.

clinical, she observed two young boys being circumcised. She withdrew from the program the next day.

With her associate's degree from Southeastern, she decided to take another stab at college in a different medical field: psychology. At Pikeville College in Pikeville, Ky., she received her bachelor's and met the man who would indirectly introduce her to the world of Goddard.

Daniel Schnopp-Wyatt, the husband of Johnson's experimental psychology professor at Pikeville, had just completed his master's study at Goddard. One day he asked Gwen if she was going into a graduate study.

"He said to me, 'I think you would love Goddard, and I think they'd love you,'" she remembers.

### FINDING GOD AT GODDARD

Her Goddard journey seemed to parallel the rocky path she had taken in her life, and she struggled to get her study where it needed to be. At first, she wanted to investigate treating substance abuse using shamanistic techniques.

"I have always been fascinated with anything occult," she says. But it was hard for Gwen to get people in rural Kentucky—who are very set in their Christian ways—to reach out to a belief in alternative healing.

"I wanted to stay away from anything that had to do with Christianity," she says. "But this was pretty farfetched with my [clients] here at home. They were suspicious of it."

Nothing she proposed in her hypothesis worked out, and she worried because she didn't want to publish false findings.

"I struggled. I really struggled," she says. "I was agonizing and agonizing about what to do about it."

One night, while contemplating what she should do, she had an epiphany.

"I had turned my back on my upbringing as far as religion or the things of God. I rebelled against that," she says. "That night I realized that there was help for my [clients], but I had to approach them from where they were, instead of where I wanted to take them."

With this new approach, one that would allow and even invite religion, she started to rework her entire study plan. She switched advisors and found S.B. Sowbel, the person who would give her the encouragement and guidance she needed.

"Gwen trusted that all would work out," Sowbel says. "She followed her passion, she was and is committed to social change, she is what I like to call a superb 'hearthead,' and she was willing to explore new ways of responding to an identified problem."

The Health Arts and Sciences Program at Goddard, as Sowbel put it, "interests those who are self-directed, have passions that other programs do not support as viable areas of scholarly inquiry and are deeply, deeply committed to serving their community and the world."

Gwen fit this mold and after finally "trusting the

process" and letting her project go where it needed to go, she achieved what she went to Goddard to achieve.

Her graduate thesis was a documentary-creative film in which she interviewed her subjects on how they used praise, worship, daily devotion and prayer to quickly come out of their addiction.

"In essence, what happened was, I took a journey ... and came right back to where I started from," she says.

### BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Today Gwen is a community activist, a volunteer, a professional development counselor at the University of Kentucky and a teacher for the Eastern Kentucky Child Care Coalition.

At the university, she is a recruiter for a childcare provider scholarship program called the Quality Enhancement Initiative, which gives scholarships to early childcare providers. At the Child Care Coalition, she teaches classes for childcare providers on topics ranging from health and safety to abuse prevention to early literacy.

She still uses her grandmother's home remedies and herbs for healing; in fact, she owned her own herbal store for a few years, All Mystery Earth Medicine. But these days, music and faith have come to the forefront of her life. She uses her music to heal and takes her guitar with her everywhere she goes.

**"I had to get back to where I came from. Not the oppression, but the faith. You can see God's hand in what has happened."**

—GWEN JOHNSON (HAS '05)

On Monday evenings, Gwen does Christian-based substance abuse counseling for female prisoners at Letcher County Jail.

"A lot of those women know me from my 'rebellious' years," she says. "There's only one cell for the women and only eight bunks. The eight bunks go to the ladies with seniority. The other 10 or more ladies sleep on pallets on the floor."

She is also the youth director at her non-denominational church, Cornerstone. Despite the ultra-conservative ways of the church she grew up in—where women were not allowed to speak except to sing and young men where not allowed to have their hair past their ears—and despite the oppression of women that still lingers in rural Kentucky today, Gwen has found a reborn faith in Christianity and society. The firm philosophy of healing and change she found at Goddard has only strengthened her resolve to stay with the path she is on.

"I had to get back to where I came from. Not the oppression, but the faith," she says. "You can see God's hand in what has happened." ■