



## Sometimes you fall into a group of people, and you become like a family

Rural community members took on the coal industry in Southern Indiana – and won.

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**Nick Smaligo, Ph.D.**

*Community Resilience Liaison,  
Indiana University's Center for Rural Engagement*



When the time came for Randy Vaal to speak in front of friends, neighbors, and strangers about what had brought him to the table, only one word came to him: *atonement*.

We were seated in a big circle, all 35 of us in a room at the Sisters of St. Benedict Monastery in rural Ferdinand, Indiana. Around the tables were a number of Sisters and their community stakeholders, representatives from Indiana University, and Randy's fellow members of Southern Indiana Citizens for Quality of Life (SWICQL, affectionately pronounced as "swickel"). This was our first large meeting to begin developing our proposal for the EPA Community Change Grant, a transformative opportunity to invest in environmental justice organizing made possible by the Biden-Harris administration's Inflation Reduction Act.

Our aim was to bring together the environmental justice work of SWICQL with the Sisters' desire to respond to Pope Francis' *Laudato Si* Encyclical, and transform their 192-acre monastery into a regional center responding to "the cry of the earth." We were about 15 minutes into a round of introductions that would last two hours as each person took all the time, they needed to describe what had happened in their life to bring them to this remarkable table.



*Lauren Waldrip, Glen Hooks, Chris Ladner, Leon Childs at the 2023 Rural Renaissance Conference.*

I talked to Randy a few months after the meeting, as he drove back from visiting his grandkids in Texas, and he remembered this moment well. Born and raised in southern Indiana, he left home in 1979 and only moved back 40 years later.

“During that time, I didn’t pay much attention to my hometown, and a lot of things happened there that weren’t very good. I didn’t really pay much attention, and I didn’t do anything about it. When I got back, I thought I needed to make up for lost time. So, that’s one side of what I meant by atonement.”

But there was another aspect to his desire for atonement.

“When I left, I went to work for an oil company and then an oil field service company. I worked all around the world, and I got a lot of exposure to things that were environmentally irresponsible. I always knew in the back of my mind that I wasn’t doing what was responsible.



While I was working in these companies, I tried to do my best to make sure people were aware of some of the issues. I told myself, ‘Somebody’s gotta do it.’ But I did my share of damage, and I need to do what I can to make up for it.”

After a pause, he added: “I don’t know if I could go back to that business now. I’ve changed, and the group of people who I’m with has helped make that change.”

Randy didn’t know it when he moved back to Spencer County, but his opportunity to begin making up for it was about to come knocking. In 2018, Riverview Energy’s plans were announced for the construction of a massive facility that would transform coal into liquid diesel in the small town of Dale, Indiana. This would only be the third coal-to-diesel power plant in the world, and the process, as SWICQL demonstrated through a tireless campaign to their neighbors, regional leaders, and national politicians, would have been a disastrous increase in the pollution burden for a region already suffering from the highest concentration of ‘Superpolluter’ coal power plants in the country – not to mention toxic releases from a number of other industries. A group of concerned residents, few of whom knew each other before and even fewer would have considered themselves environmentalists, formed the Southwestern Indiana Citizens for Quality of Life to prevent this facility from being built. They each came with their own reasons: some had been working for years against industrial pollution, some were farmers, and some saw their dreams of a peaceful retirement threatened by a nightmare of a Mordor-like industrial facility on the horizon. When SWICQL formed, Randy showed up.

“In our first meetings, they were suspicious of me because I was more conservative politically, and my background was in oil. But we developed trust, and now I don’t know what I’d do without them.”

Now, Randy serves the group as one of its vice presidents.

SWICQL’s ranks include people from all walks of life: their president, Mary Hess, is a retired post office worker. Randy’s co-vice president, Rock Emmert, is a former English teacher who has been a passionate advocate for the southern Indiana environment for decades. Other members include a current public-school teacher, farmers, doctors, bankers, a baker, a former Department of Defense employee, and more. Randy isn’t even the only retired energy industry worker. SWICQL’s financial officer, Jane Shipp, previously served as the chief financial officer of an international coal company.

SWICQL’s willingness to invite the active participation of people who have come to question the industries they left was an asset in their campaign against Riverview. Randy used his



knowledge of chemical processes in the oil refinery to deliver educational presentations about why the plant would be disastrous and how the company – and the Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM)– weren’t telling the whole story about the impact.

But what is so surprising is not only that this community organization emerged among residents, nor that such an eclectic group of people would engage in it together. *What is surprising is that SWICQL won.*

In August of 2023, IDEM withdrew Riverview’s permit to operate for failure to commence construction within the allotted permit time— delays that were aided in no small part by SWICQL’s numerous legal challenges and organizing efforts.

Another surprise is that this win didn’t end their work. Having successfully said “no” to an unacceptable path of rural development, the SWICQL team continues to push forward, pursuing an environmentally and economically resilient future for their region.

The relationships Randy formed through his work with SWICQL have given him the courage to honestly confront the impact of the industry he spent his life working for.

“Sometimes you fall into a group of people, and you become like a family. That’s what happened with us. I talk about atonement, but having said that, I’m not doing this out of guilt. It is a pleasure as well.”

I asked Randy what he would say to others who are currently in the position he was in, working in environmentally destructive industries while knowing in the back of their mind that what they are doing doesn’t align with their values. His advice?

“Keep an open mind. Recognize that the world is changing, and you can change as well.”