Dear Stronach Family,

In the last month, the West Virginia ‘pilot,’ as we termed it initially, has begun to both materialize and show signs of closure. September will be the last full month we will work on the project while on the ground in Appalachia. With this deadline driving towards us at what feels like unreal speeds, the project is getting new life and continuation after we leave, which is extremely satisfying and fulfilling to see.

The project is moving forward building a website that is data driven and has people’s narratives intertwined, as a tool for public awareness of water issues in the region. Some of the website’s content has already begun to be put out via social media (including the ‘meme’ version of a map seen above). These maps have already been useful for the Advocates for a Safe Water System, the organization that Gabe now serves on the steering committee for, as Advocates has started to use them in promotional materials in their campaign to have a safer water system.

Also, all of the interviews collected have been a part of an oral history project, which two Marshall University anthropology professors have headed up. This collaboration has been extremely fruitful, as the actual backers of the oral history has been the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy. As such, we are hopeful that the center will house the final website on their server, using it as a resource for policy and public awareness about the data and experience of water contamination.

All the while, the political ramifications from the January 9th chemical spill are still at play, and our work is finding itself ever more politically relevant. Recently the Public Service Comission, which regulates utilities, held a hearing on what questions the public could ask the water company, which was relatively successful outcome. Advocates was a big part of pushing the commission, using some of the media we have generated in their public outreach around the hearing. At the same time, the chairman of the commission recused himself, the pro-regulation commissioner resigned, leaving only one commissioner left – the commissioner that has favored
the water company this entire process. And now, the investigation of the water company will not be finished now until next February.

We find this move to be more than simply standard practice. This appears to be serious political work. This is a sinister moment for work around creating a safer water system in West Virginia, however, it makes our final website, with data and personal experiences, all the more salient. Our website will be used to leverage support for public outcries of transparency and actual regulation.

Furthermore, we have just started a process of developing our web services past our time on the ground in West Virginia. Dr. Eric Lassiter, heading up the water crisis oral history project, is bringing our project into the Graduate Division of Marshall University, running a graduate seminar to build onto the website. This is an extremely exciting development, as this class will not only extend the life of our work, bringing a host of sharp West Virginia graduate student into the web project, it brings more oral history data onto the website. Furthermore, this will offer an opportunity to delve into the politics of representation, questions about how ethnography is inherently political, and other more academic aspects we have yet to explore. Gabe will be skyping in to help participate in the class.

And again, this past month has been chock full of learning moments, while we are learning some large, lessons about websites and social change. To start here, this month we concretized the final products coming out of research, organizing, and partnerships in West Virginia. In that process we realized that our initial plans to have user generated content, namely participatory research online, is actually very difficult. The actual process of creating social spaces online, where people want to, and actively participate in community, is not easily facilitated. Particularly difficult is not only making a useful, easy to use site that serves the needs of people in water crises, but working with rural populations that use computers in very different ways that ourselves and urban dwellers.

After long consultations with Appalachian Voices, who has worked on some interactive maps for reporting chemical spills, which we thought about expanding onto, we learned that interactive mapping systems were not the most useful web tools that could be made. Instead we heard that creating media with solid narratives about how change could happen (something that is difficult with all participatory systems) would be more useful. In fact, no such digital, data driven, narrative media sites existed for telling the story of Appalachia’s water crises. As such, we are not building a participatory component onto the web platform.

However, in making this decision we have crafted our project into something that is politically salient, has partnerships in academia, government, and organizing, while also allow us to develop digital media skills. As we see the end of our time in West Virginia within sight, it becomes clear that this is certainly not the end of this project nor our involvement in the region’s issues.

Regards From the Field,

Gabe and Rachel