



SALLY SMITH (L.) AND GRIP EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ALLYSON SIWIK AT NOV. 15 PARTY HONORING SMITH (GRIP PHOTO)

"I had no prior background in science or mining," shrugs Sally, a self-described concerned citizen who immersed herself in the machinations of a technically complex and politically powerful business. "You should see the piles of big fat documents I get to read through."

Born and raised in the wetlands of East Texas, Sally spent time as a mother, farmer, and shopkeeper there and in Kentucky before relocating to New Mexico. "Before I built my house," she laughs, "I'd lived in a tipi and an old school bus in Grant County."

Ensclosed in her new home, the efforts of this

life-long nature lover paid off. Through joint cooperation of the New Mexico Environment Department and U.S. Forest Service, polluted tailings at Royal John were covered, a sediment pond created, and vegetation re-established. Watershed contamination was minimized.

Then Sally turned her attention to the much larger Tyrone, Cobre, and Chino Mines. The latter's Santa Rita pit was among the largest open-pit mines in the U.S. For ten years she'd passed it while driving along Highway 152 between the Mimbres Valley and Silver City. One day she took a hard look at the pit, then owned by Phelps Dodge, and asked herself: "Who is holding these guys responsible and accountable? No one considered what the downside of the mines might be. State and city officials, Grant County commissioners—they all just gave [operators] what they wanted." Many local politicians, she concluded, "were part of a good ol' boy elite: buddies with those running the mines. The prevailing attitude was, 'Let 'em have whatever they want and don't ask any questions.'"

For decades—probably since industrial-scale mining began in the area during the early 1900s—precious little independent research was done on how large mines such as Santa Rita (also known as Chino), Tyrone, and Cobre impacted the communities whose interests elected officials and government regulators purportedly represented.

But this status quo was about to change.

Sally became aware of the New Mexico Mining Act, which became state law in June 1993 and provided stronger oversight of mining, which had been lightly regulated since U.S. control of the region began in 1846. Her interest piqued, Sally began attending meetings held in order to develop the regulations for the Act. She met and aligned herself with two lawyers at the Santa Fe-based New Mexico Environmental Law Center: executive director Doug Meiklejohn and then-staff attorney Doug Wolf. Her close association with the Law Center

has continued uninterrupted ever since then.

"I wanted to further educate myself about how our mines and water quality was regulated, what reclamation was possible and protective," explains Sally, glancing out a window at the tree-shaded creek. (A cleaner stream due to efforts she spearheaded.) Before long Sally helped hammer out policies supporting the Mining Act and was later asked to serve the Director's Advisory Committee for the Mining Commission of the state's Energy, Mining, and Natural Resources Department.

"I developed a working relationship with the people in the state Environment Department as well as at the Law Center," she continues. "I went to conferences in places like Montana and met my cohorts working on mining issues around the West. I begged people to come to meetings, to write letters, and to testify. I became more visible, spoke publicly at permit hearings, wrote letters to editors, and got interviewed by the media."

Sally met fellow activist Harry Browne at a mining-related meeting and together, in 1997, they incorporated GRIP as a nonprofit committed to the wise use and conservation of natural resources in southwestern New Mexico. Sally has been president of the board of directors ever since.

"From the start," she says, "we wanted GRIP to work on sustainability and quality-of-life issues, but mining has been more of the primary focus." From the outset, not everyone was happy

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with the group's activities: "We got threats, nasty letters, and angry phone calls from some people. In New Mexico, this industry was not used to push-back at all."

Over time—and in the face of several successful legal and legislative challenges—mining officials began to take GRIP more seriously. It became clear that Sally, Harry, and other concerned residents were determined to translate mining jargon into layman's terms and to follow permit processes as long as necessary to make sure the public interest was well served.

"By my way of thinking," says Sally, "somebody [representing the public] should sit at the table and work with the mines on various issues." One way this determination has paid off is "we now have quarterly meetings with Freeport-McMoRan [successor to Phelps Dodge in operating Grant County mines and the world's largest publicly traded copper company] in order to update GRIP on what is going on that may impact our communities. It was started at their initiative as way to keep us informed."

Better public relations and a willingness to listen are a step forward. Fifteen years ago, Sally remembers, mining executives tended to play hardball in response to the push for greater accountability, claiming costs were too high to implement earth-friendly changes and insisting that precious jobs would be lost.

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