

Reconnecting McDOWELL

Stay connected with McDowell

McDowell County is an American story that deserves a new chapter—one filled with promise, with goodwill, with the type of shared commitment that offers solid reasons to believe in a brighter future. Be a part of this historic partnership and show your support for McDowell's children and the greater community by joining the effort at www.ReconnectingMcDowell.org.

● 40,000 Books
for Young Readers

● Health Fair
in Welch

● Kids' Fishing Day
in McDowell County

'... THROUGH PARTNERSHIP, PEOPLE WHO LOOK, TALK AND THINK DIFFERENTLY
CAN BAND TOGETHER TO FULFILL THEIR DREAMS AND ASPIRATIONS.'

Ribbon-Cutting Ceremony at Renaissance Village

On June 10, Reconnecting McDowell held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for Renaissance Village, our multiuse housing project. The event brought together dedicated partners that helped actualize this vision for a building that would not only provide housing, but also serve as a symbol of hope and a bright future for the County. The event was featured on AFT.org:



The official ribbon-cutting commemorates the opening of Renaissance Village.

RECONNECTING McDOWELL DEDICATES NEW HOUSING

It's been a long and winding road, but Renaissance Village—a sleek, union-built complex of teacher housing and retail shops—is open for business. More than a decade in the making and part of a massive AFT-led campaign called Reconnecting McDowell, the four-story building is a beacon of new enterprise and hope for its community in rural West Virginia.

A big crowd of dignitaries and residents of McDowell County **turned out for an official ribbon-cutting** June 10, with praise heaped on the Reconnecting McDowell partners for seeing it through. Not only have the 100-plus partners produced apartments and shops to anchor Welch, the county seat, but they also have drummed

up grants to promote early literacy, mentor students through high school and college, provide internet access, hold health fairs and vaccine clinics, bolster the local economy and strengthen families.

In introducing AFT President Randi Weingarten, AFT-West Virginia President Fred Albert expressed pride in his former students and admiration for Weingarten: "You talk about a proud heart," he said.

Weingarten reflected on the hard times that overtook McDowell County as the region's coal industry subsided. In some ways, the rest of the nation has caught up with McDowell's tough circumstances, she said. But there's hope, she added, describing how, through partnership, people who look, talk and think differently can band together to fulfill their dreams and aspirations. Renaissance Village, she said, is a symbol of renewal.

"We knew as we honored the old economy of coal—not abandoned it, it, not said it was useless but honored it—[that we could create] a new

See Ribbon-Cutting on Page 5

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'WE ARE STRONGLY COMMITTED TO GETTING CHILDREN EXCITED ABOUT THE LOVE OF READING'

40,000 Books for Young Readers

Have you ever wondered what 40,000 books in one place looks like? The staff of Reconnecting McDowell knew it was a big number, but the reality hit home when an 18-wheel truck pulled up to the McDowell County Schools Career and Technical Center in April. McDowell County Schools has generously provided a home for the books while they are being sorted and packed for distribution.

"It is a daunting number, but we have a plan to get books into the hands of readers this summer and fall," says Debra Elmore, Reconnecting McDowell's book giveaway coordinator. "We are strongly committed to getting children excited about the love of reading. Research shows that children exposed to books at an early age are more successful academically in all subject

'It is a daunting number, but we have a plan to get books into the hands of readers this summer and fall. ... By providing these books, we are promoting literacy and helping to prevent the "summer slide" learning loss.'

—Debra Elmore,
Reconnecting McDowell
book giveaway coordinator

areas and that reading just 15 minutes a day will boost achievement for all. By providing these books, we are promoting literacy and helping to prevent the 'summer slide' learning loss. We are so thrilled that the American Federation of Teachers chose Reconnecting McDowell to be part of its Reading Opens the World project by supplying us with books to not only give away to children, but to also create book nooks and little keeper libraries, as well as supplement school, classroom and public libraries."

The book distribution plan is already in progress and started at the Renaissance Village ribbon-cutting ceremony (see story on page 1). Reading materials have been supplied to several other events, including community baby showers in Raysal and Bradshaw, a Kids' Fun Fair at the Welch Armory, and for WVU Extension Service's Energy Express summer program.



At top, Reconnecting McDowell gave books away at WVU Extension's Kids' Fun Fair.

Reconnecting McDowell community and school liaison Debra Elmore, above, opens the first of several boxes of books that will be given to children in the County.

CLEANUP A SUCCESS THANKS TO HARD-WORKING VOLUNTEERS

McDowell Litter Cleanup: 'Make It Shine'

On April 30, the Make It Shine McDowell coalition conducted a countywide litter cleanup program. Following the success of a similar effort in October 2021, the spring event netted more than 400 large bags of trash. The event was augmented by the McDowell Solid Waste Authority, which obtained a grant to place dumpsters at various sites in the eastern part of the County. The dumpsters allowed residents to dispose of larger items; more than 50 tons of waste were collected.

The coalition, founded by Reconnecting McDowell and the McDowell Convention and Visitors Bureau, features members from church groups, volunteer fire departments, labor organizations, other nonprofits and committed citizens. The next event, scheduled for Sept. 17, will be coordinated with Trout Unlimited and its annual stream cleanup in Elkhorn Creek.

Make It Shine McDowell's countywide cleanup was a success thanks to the hard work of many volunteers.



'THIS YEAR'S GROWCERY IS OFF TO A TERRIFIC START'

Go Growcery

The Go Growcery mobile farmers market is up and running for a third year. The mobile market, a partnership of Reconnecting McDowell and the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition (WVFFC), has a revised schedule* based on market demand, and taking high fuel prices into account. Stops this year include six in McDowell County, two in Wyoming County, and a weekly appearance at the Beckley Farmers Market in Raleigh County.

"This year's Growcery is off to a terrific start," says James Russell, foodshed coordinator with the WVFFC. "We have a nice selection of produce already, and we expect this to expand even more as the growing season hits full capacity. The market has a growing network of people providing fruits and vegetables. We also are featuring locally produced products, including relish, salsa, and jams and jellies."

Go Growcery purchases as much as possible from local growers. If you plant a vegetable garden, consider growing extra produce and selling it to Go Growcery! Contact James Russell at jrussell@wvfoodandfarm.org

The project is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Learn more and follow the Go Growcery Facebook page to stay up to date: bit.ly/gogrowcery.



MONDAY

Beckley | 2:30-8:30p | Beckley ARH SWWC parking lot

TUESDAY

laeger | 12-5p | wide spot at the end of bridge beside Rt 52

WEDNESDAY

War | 12-5p | across from Pioneer Community Bank

THURSDAY

Mullens | 10a-5p | Mullens Opportunity Center

FRIDAY

Pineville | 12-5p | parking lot of the library

SATURDAY

Welch | 12-5p | lot beside Shoe Show

*Schedule is subject to change.
Follow the Go Growcery Facebook page for updates

'... WE REALLY KICKED THINGS INTO ANOTHER GEAR WHEN RECONNECTING McDOWELL GOT INVOLVED'

Friends of the Tug Fork River Charges Ahead



The Tug Fork River.

This spring, the Friends of the Tug Fork River obtained 501(c)3 nonprofit status from the IRS. Founded in 2016-17 by sportsmen in Pike County, Ky., and Mingo County, W.Va., the group quickly grew to include anglers, boaters and nature lovers.

In 2021, Friends of the Tug Fork River obtained Flatwater Trail status from the state of West Virginia. The Bloody Mingo Tug Fork Water Trail was a significant milestone for the group, which spent more than five years working to improve the river—including the removal of more than 5,000 tires. A new tackle and bait shop opened in Williamson, and air boat tours of the river from Matewan are booked solid. Heron, bald eagles and other wildlife are

routinely spotted on these excursions. In 2021, the group looked to expand the trail into McDowell County, where the river starts, and contacted Reconnecting McDowell for help.

"Thanks to our many supporters, we were able to make some important improvements on the river," says Pete Runyon, president of the Friends of the Tug Fork River. "But we really kicked things into another gear when Reconnecting McDowell got involved. We owe them a lot of credit for helping us create a board of directors, drafting bylaws, and getting official nonprofit status."

The group is working on several projects, including Flatwater Trail status for the Mighty McDowell Tug Fork Water Trail, improvements for

kayak and small boat access, water quality testing, and educational activities for river users.

Today, the Friends of the Tug Fork River Facebook page has more than 15,000 members. Follow at bit.ly/tugriver.



Health Fair in Welch

On May 13, Reconnecting McDowell, South Central Educational Development, Unicare, Mountainheart, and McDowell County FACES joined forces to sponsor Making Health Happen at the Caffrey Center in Welch. The fair was the second of the year (the first was held in War in January), and featured more than 40 vendors who shared information, supplies and health screenings. Participants could get free eye exams, diabetes care and A1C testing, blood pressure measurement, clinical breast exams, HIV and hepatitis tests, and, of course, COVID-19 vaccines and rapid tests.

'Access to trusted information about healthcare is a challenge in McDowell County. These fairs provide an invaluable service at no charge to area residents.'

—Frances McNulty, Reconnecting McDowell community liaison

The partnership will host another health fair this fall. Contact Frances McNulty at FMcNulty@aftvw.org for more information.

At top, attendees browse through informational resources at the Making Health Happen fair.

Mark Kemp and Frances McNulty of Reconnecting McDowell attend the health fair at the Caffrey Center in Welch. Reconnecting McDowell was a sponsor for the event.



Ribbon-Cutting: Turning collaboration into a way of life

From Page 1

way, a new economy," Weingarten said. She added her own hope that the partners would turn their collaboration into a way of life.

Gayle Manchin, the state's former first lady and president of the state board of education, who is now co-chair of the federal Appalachian Regional Commission, was the impetus behind Reconnecting McDowell and Renaissance Village.

"This is an important day," she said. She described the terrible teacher attrition that motivated her: "You know, when you walk into a classroom of children, and you do a little roundtable with them, they ask: 'Why do people not like us? Why do teachers not want to be at our school? We try to do what they ask us to do. We're trying to be really good. We want to keep our teachers.' But teachers don't stay." They leave for better pay and working conditions, she said, and the children feel the blame.

Manchin spoke of the student supports, enrichment activities and wraparound services that children need. She recalled someone asking her, "If it takes a village to raise a child, who raises the village?"

Hand over heart and choking up at times, Manchin simply said, "Thank you."

Read the full story at:
www.aft.org/RVhousing

MOST YOUNG ANGLERS CAUGHT A FISH OR TWO!

Kids' Fishing Day in McDowell County

On May 14, more than 130 children in McDowell County, received help with learning how to fish and new fishing poles to take home with them. The Kids' Fishing Day was held at Berwind and Anawalt lakes, and included a lesson about watersheds, lunch, and a raffle for bikes and other prizes. Approximately 90 kids participated at Berwind Lake and another 45 at Anawalt Lake. Both lakes were stocked by the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources the morning of the event, and most of the young anglers caught a fish or two!

The Kids' Fishing Day was spearheaded by the Friends of the Tug Fork River, the McDowell County Convention and Visitors Bureau, and Reconnecting McDowell. Funding for the rods and reels was provided by a grant from the National Coal Heritage Area Authority. Other organizations involved included the Welch and War chapters of the Kiwanis Club, the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, the Ghost Riders Motorcycle Club, the McDowell Sheriff's Department, and the Fish Trap Bait Shop.

Children attending the Kids' Fishing Day show off their catches.





Let's Connect

Follow Reconnecting McDowell on social media to receive the latest updates and news. We share information on webinars, job-training opportunities and upcoming community events. We also highlight our partners and their work in McDowell County and the state.

Social Media



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