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" Films trace electricity to its origin - festival delves into price of coal mining"

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Kentuckians often are told they enjoy cheap electricity thanks to the state's coal mines, but not everyone agrees the true cost of that energy is disclosed in monthly utility bills.

So activists behind Mountain Justice Summer -- a protest campaign in Kentucky and other Appalachian states, aimed at mountaintop removal mining -- are bringing images of devastated mountains, fouled rivers and asthmatic children to Lexington's Kentucky Theatre on Tuesday night.

City dwellers should understand the effect they have on Appalachian communities every time they flip on a light switch, said Dave Cooper, who helped organize the Mountain Justice Summer Film Festival.

"People don't really know where their electricity comes from," Cooper said last week. "Most electricity in Kentucky comes from mining and burning coal. Our intention is to educate people about the impact of that mining, the impact of that burning."

Five documentaries will be shown, most of them new and focused on Appalachia and coal.

Sludge filmmaker Robert Salyer, who lives in Whitesburg, remembers getting a panicked phone call in October 2000 about "some really huge sludge spill over in Martin County, bigger than anything anyone had seen before."

More than 300 million gallons of thick coal-mining waste poured out of a burst slurry impoundment and into nearby streams. Lawyers for the coal company called it "an act of God." The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency called it the worst ecological disaster in the history of the Eastern United States.

Nobody died. But as Salyer watched blackened streams overflow their banks and rip through the valleys, he looked for bodies.

"I remember a basketball hoop in this one yard, where the bottom of the net was actually dragging through the sludge," Salyer said. "I didn't see how anyone could have survived that if they'd been in the way."

Salyer filmed the disaster and lengthy cleanup effort, then turned his attention to Jack Spadaro, a federal mine-safety official who challenged the coal industry and government's accounts of what went wrong in Martin County. Spadaro, who argued that the spill could have been avoided, was demoted, and he later quit.

"One of the women I interview in the film said she was shocked by Spadaro going public with his accusations," Salyer said. "Because who expects someone in a government regulatory agency to actually tell us the truth?"

In his film, *Kilowatt Ours*, Jeff Barrie shows the environmental damage caused by coal, then explains how a typical modern home in the Southeast burns the equivalent of 6 tons of coal a year through air conditioning, lights and growing collections of appliances, from computers to hand-lotion warmers.

Barrie offers a few ambitious alternatives to coal, such as solar- and wind-powered plants, which some utility companies are experimenting with. But even the poorest apartment dwellers -- and here, Barrie includes himself -- can reduce the need for coal with energy-efficient appliances and compact fluorescent light bulbs.

There is a disconnect between public outrage over destructive coal mining methods and the average person's hoggish use of electricity, said Barrie, in an interview from his Nashville home.

"We're all responsible for the environment through our lifestyle choices," he said. "If you watch this film and say, 'Gee, air pollution, global warming, that's too bad,' and go home and forget about it, then I've failed."

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