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These Widows' Stories

Still Fighting: These Widows' Stories Show Larger Effects of Black Lung Epidemic

Nancy and Rich Potter had the kind of marriage that made other couples jealous. He'd take her on spontaneous trips. She'd wear her Daisy Dukes just for him.

Joyce Birman said her late husband, George, made a terrible first impression. It was his apology for it that made her fall for him, hard.

Vickie Salyers' husband, Gene, loved hunting and fishing, but he loved being a father and grandfather most of all.

Potter, Birman and Salyers all married eastern Kentucky coal miners. And like countless Appalachian women before them, they each watched as their loved ones became ill.

"He would cough up this real gross stuff," said Potter. "It even got to the point – we had to raise the head of our bed and put bricks under it so it would raise his head up."

Appalachia is experiencing what researchers call an epidemic of black lung disease. An investigation by NPR and *Frontline* found that regulators for decades failed to protect miners, despite knowing that exposure to silica dust was contributing to a surge in the illness. One in 10 coal miners (and one in five coal miners in Appalachia) suffer from some form of black lung.

Vickie Salyers' and Joyce Birman's husbands both died in 2013. Nancy Potter lost Rich in 1997.

The women sought federal black lung benefits through the Department of Labor. Their experiences show how a system designed to help provide for coal mining families became a complicated and fraught bureaucracy.

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