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Annenberg Foundation spokesman Charles Weingarten explains how he was moved by the residents of W.Va., in the aftermath of the Upper Big Branch coal disaster. He promise \$2.5 million toward a new Marsh Fork Elementary School. Listening, at right, are Sen. Richard Browning, D-Wyoming, and School Building Authority Director Mark Manchin. **Related photo, Page 3A.**

'A CHORD REALLY STRUCK DEEP IN MY HEART' Funds secured for new school



Watching a six-year struggle fetch results, with enough money pledged to build a new Marsh Fork Elementary School, are, from left Judy Bonds, co-director of Coal River Mountain Watch, Debbie Jarrell and her husband, Ed Wiley, of Rock Creek, whose group, Pennies of Promise, put up more than \$10,000 to help replace the school, which they feel is threatened by a Massey Energy coal silo and massive slurry impoundment.

By Mannix Porterfield
REGISTER-HERALD REPORTER

CHARLESTON — Six years ago, an activist group teamed with worried parents in a rural pocket of Raleigh County to draw attention to Marsh Fork Elementary School's proximity to a huge coal silo and 2.8 billion-gallon slurry impoundment, and began a push for a new structure.

Students got into the act, hauling jars crammed with pennies, about \$600 worth, to the Capitol in a plea for some bigger assistance.

Friday, the efforts of many came to a head when the Annenberg Foundation, based in Los Angeles, Calif., put up \$2.5 million for a new school, hours after both the Raleigh County school board and Massey Energy, owner of the silo and coal waste impoundment, upped the ante on their original \$1 million pledges by half a million more.

Combined with the \$2.6 million assured by the School

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Building Authority, there is sufficient money now to replace Marsh Fork at one of three sites along W.Va., far removed from the mining operation and well out of the flood plain.

"We're finally going to get a new, safe school for these kids," Judy Bonds, co-director of Coal River Mountain Watch, which opened the crusade, said just before Gov. Joe Manchin introduced Charles Weingarten of Annenberg Foundation for the formal announcement.

Weingarten told an audience in Manchin's reception room how the people of W.Va. impressed him after he drove up and down the road in the aftermath of America's worst mining disaster in four decades — an explosion at Upper Big Branch mine April 5 that killed 29 workers.

Before he spoke, Bo Webb, another Coal River Mountain Watch leader, gently rebuked a

provincial attitude that holds "outsiders" suspiciously.

"There's been a lot of things said in the last six years about outsiders coming into West Virginia," he said, looking back at Weingarten.

"Thank God for this outsider."

Weingarten was watching the finals of the NCAA basketball playoffs when he learned of the Upper Big Branch tragedy.

"A chord really struck deep in my heart and I really felt connected and wanted to come to West Virginia to figure out a way I could help," he said.

Seeing heroes paraded before him on the television screen, he recalled, "I needed to feel the soul of this place."

"When you enter in West Virginia," he said, "you feel like you're really entering America. Route 3 is really the metaphor of almost the veins and arteries of this country. It's an extremely powerful place."

Taking a preacher up on his invitation to attend a church service, Weingarten was approached by a little girl bearing her homemade drawing.

"It's you and me, and thank you for coming to Marsh Fork Elementary and my church," he quoted her.

Then on Monday, he learned of the SBA's decision to provide \$2.6 million, leaving the proposed school about \$4 million shy, so he decided to intervene.

"This grant is a gift to the spirit of the miners who brought me here," he explained. "This gift is to all the beautiful inhabitants of this area."

Mark Manchin, the SBA's director, said the dirt could start flying within eight months, following the customary, 90-day planning period, which gets under way Monday. Once crews hit the ground, it takes about one year to 14 months to finish.

"Two years from today, I feel confident you'll be standing in a new Marsh Fork Elementary School," the SBA official said.

Bonds said her group has no preference as to location, since all three sites in mind by the school board are acceptable, adding, "We'd be happy with any."

Gov. Manchin said the fund-

ing built to a climax during "a most challenging and horrific time," following the Upper Big Branch disaster.

"That little school touched the world and the people," the governor said.

"The people of West Virginia make West Virginia so special and so different, the connections that we have and how we work together."

Senate President Earl Ray Tomblin, D-Logan, recalled the sight of children bringing in penny jars to help get a fund rolling for a new school.

"Hopefully, this school will bring some relevance back to the area," he said.

Sen. Mike Green, D-Raleigh, who predicted only Monday after the SBA offered only \$2.6 million of the total still needed that the balance would come, called the effort "a crowning achievement."

"It's been such a roller-coaster ride not only for the students and teachers at Marsh Fork, but the people of the community who fought for this," he said.

Sen. Richard Browning, D-Wyoming, termed the school

funding "a magnificent achievement" and said it shows how much easier it is when all parties are on the same page.

Even if Massey's coal facilities weren't in the very shadow, Principal Shannon Pioch suggested before the ceremony that the school should be replaced.

"We have some issues in our building, structural issues," she said.

Then, during the announcement, when Gov. Manchin recognized here, Pioch said, "This is a great day for my students, my staff, and the whole community of Coal River. It's a celebration that we're just going to jump into, once I get back to Marsh Fork Elementary School. We are Marsh Fork. We are going to have a new school."

And that \$600 in pennies still stuffed in the jars?

Webb advised the governor they remain on hold in the basement of the Capitol.

"We still have them," Manchin replied. "We'll put them to good use."

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