

# High Rocks



J O U R N E Y S



On March 27, 2015 Sarah Riley, executive director of High Rocks Educational Corporation, was awarded by unanimous vote the Appalachian Studies Association's highest award for community service, the Helen M. Lewis Award.

The Appalachian Studies Association, founded in 1977, promotes the preservation and study of Appalachian culture. The association creates a shared community for those writing, researching, and teaching about Appalachia. Every year the Helen M. Lewis Award is given to an individual or an organization that has made exemplary contributions to Appalachia through involvement with and service to its people and communities.

Sarah is the youngest recipient of the Helen M. Lewis Award and only the third West Virginian to receive the honor since its inception in 2001.

The following are letters, excerpts and thoughts from those that nominated Sarah for this honor.

***In recognizing her efforts, we recognize the tremendous impact High Rocks girls have had, and continue to have, on their home communities in Appalachia and beyond.***

"...Sarah is a little bit of everything. She's the absolute queen of tough love, but she can also make you feel like the most important person in the world with one look. She could give a really powerful speech to a crowded room full of people just as easily as she could hike with us up a mountain. I feel like there's nothing she can't do."

- *current High Rocks Girl*

"...The bonds that are formed between the girls and the staff at High Rocks Academy are a large part of why this program was and continues to be so unique. Sarah Riley has been there, alongside her mother and High Rocks founder Susan Burt, since day one. The program has grown significantly from the time I first started but Sarah continues to put in 150% of effort every single day and this has not changed from the time High Rocks was dreamed up and put into action. Throughout the years I have also held other roles at High Rocks such as Summer Internship and Board Member and seeing it from behind the scenes made me appreciate the amount of physical and emotional energy that it takes to make this program run. The workload is immense but Sarah makes it look effortless. Sarah could be anywhere in the world but she chose to return to her home town and work to make it a wonderful place to be a strong woman!

I also feel extremely fortunate to be blessed with a career in Pocahontas County, West Virginia, but had I not had the example of Sarah and High Rocks I am not sure that would have been a possibility. I am eternally grateful to Sarah and High Rocks Academy for being such a positive influence in my life..."

- *from Letter of support by Valarie Monaco, High Rocks Alum*





"...My journey with High Rocks Academy began when I was 14 years old in the summer before my freshman year of high school. For this 14-year old girl, the camp happened just in the nick of time. At 14, I was bored! I was unchallenged in school. I got straight A's with minimal effort and I was tired of being labeled the "smart girl". I had an extremely normal home life with a mother and father who were (and still are) happily married and who both cared and provided well for their 5 children, so naturally, I began to rebel at about this age. I had begun to think that boys, parties, etc. were what defined me. Then I met Sarah Riley and Susan Burt.

Sarah and Susan provided tutoring nights once a week where we would ride the bus to Susan's house to spend the night and while we were there we would get help with any homework or school projects as well as college prep, SAT/ACT prep, etc. Sarah was also there for emotional support through all of the trials and tribulations of being a teenage girl. Sarah became, to me, a mentor, a role model and a friend. She was an adult who treated me with respect like an equal, not like a silly teenage girl whose opinion didn't matter. I felt I had a responsibility to High Rocks to work to my full potential. I always felt challenged to go above and beyond what was minimally required of me at school to better myself and enrich my education on my own. I was also challenged later in high school to go outside of my comfort zone, to apply for colleges that I normally would not have and to really follow my dreams. I ended up graduating high school 4th in my class and went on to a private college where I would get a Master's degree.

I now work in my home town as a physician assistant at our local hospital's rural health clinic. While I went through all of these stages of my life, I continued to feel strong ties to the women at High Rocks. No matter what I had gone through, there were always open arms at High Rocks to fall back on and to give me whatever support I needed at the time..."

- from letter of support by Valarie Monaco, High Rocks Alum



“...I first met Sarah when I came to High Rocks as an intern in 2010; I was looking to work with an organization that was invested in social justice and transformational education in rural Appalachia. What I found was that and much more...Sarah Riley.

I was immediately impressed by Sarah’s commitment, enthusiasm, and depth of understanding around the issues most strongly affecting opportunities for “more” in this region and how young people shaped those opportunities. Her passion is her greatest strength; I never see her give less than 110% personally and professionally to each and every community program she contributes to.

Sarah encourages those around her to be life-long learners, to never stop asking the complex but necessary questions about how individuals can best serve their communities on the local, regional and national level. Her ability to relate to other philosophies and perspectives, her adventurous spirit, her respect for diverse ideas, and her unique ability as a teacher and facilitator to challenge others to step outside of their comfort zone so that they may achieve tremendous personal and academic success is what makes her a visionary in her field.

She is the director that every organization wishes they had...”

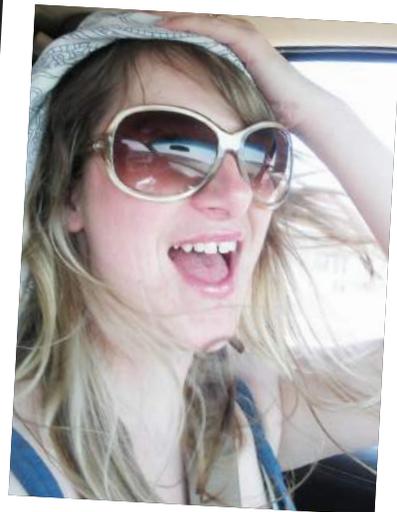
- from Letter of support by  
Margaret Falletta, High Rocks Intern Alum



"...The first time I met Sarah was for my interview to join High Rocks. It wasn't a typical interview about school or extracurricular activities; she was interested in my future goals, what I wanted to gain out of my experience, and what I had to offer to High Rocks. It seemed it mattered who I was as a person and it did not matter as much about my grades or talents.

Over the next couple of years as a High Rocks girl, I was able to develop a bond with Sarah, as so many girls do. Sarah was very present and engaged with me as a new girl and made me an effort to get to know me. As I progressed through High Rocks and high school, Sarah kept in contact with me and always wanted to catch up on my life, whether we were seeing each other every week or once a month. She always made me feel that I mattered and that my opinions and beliefs were valuable. I credit a lot of my determination and dedication to bettering my community to my experience with High Rocks and Sarah Riley..."

- from letter of support  
by Kendra Taylor, High Rocks Alum



"Sarah has such a wide range of knowledge. I feel like she could help me out with anything, but if she didn't know, she'd probably just say, 'I don't know; let's figure it out.' And then we'd figure it out..."

- current High Rocks Girl



I am writing to nominate the Executive Director of High Rocks Educational Corporation, Sarah Riley, for the Helen M. Lewis Community Service award. Sarah Riley co-founded High Rocks Educational Corporation in 1996 to support and strengthen young West Virginia women from all walks of life by helping them build the confidence to lead active lives and work toward the long-term betterment of their community. She has been planning, teaching, counseling, fundraising, networking and building this place in one way or another since then. Sarah's creative force, curricular leadership and instinct for people are an integral part of what High Rocks, an award-winning non-profit with transformational programs, community partners and regional development, is today. Currently the director of High Rocks, Sarah also raises four children, co-owns a farm with her husband selling free-range meat and eggs to a developing local market, serves as a member in seven additional community organizations, and serves on the boards of What Kids Can Do and Greater Greenbrier Valley Women's Fund and is one of the leading community members involved in the WE ARE ONE campaign focused on eliminating racism in Appalachia and the country. Due in large part to High Rocks and Sarah, Pocahontas County is now transforming into a thriving, innovative, cultural hub in rural Appalachia.

Sarah is building a world in which she did not grow up; one farmers' market, one school committee, one community wellness program, one neighbor at a time. Her leadership style teaches a radical social justice idea to hold back on telling young people what to do, and to actually listen to what they are saying. High Rocks goes farther than encouraging youth to speak by challenging them to disagree and ratify the importance of what they have to say. High Rocks teaches youth in our community that if they want to change the world, they can, but they must look inside themselves to find the courage. With Sarah's leadership, High Rocks inspires the idea that each individual has the ability to make a difference, educates them on what it takes to be the change, and empowers them with tools to find the strength-within to make that change. We are teaching our youth and community that they can be more; that they can create the life they want, regardless of where they come from. When our young people grow up, they carry the lessons of High Rocks out into the world, not only achieving their own success, but sharing our vision and passion with ever-widening circles near and far. Because of the opportunities and support they received from High Rocks, our alums have become community organizers, business owners, nurses, lawyers, financial consultants and more.

Hundreds of alumni from the first year to the present continue to stay a part of High Rocks and what we do every day. For the very first time in a long time, this isn't just a place that people leave; it's a place people strive to get to.

Sarah has led High Rocks in building partnerships with community outreach organizations throughout the region including Appalshop, the Highlander Center, and Trillium Performing Arts Council. Sarah is a consultant with the American Federation of Teacher on the reconnecting McDowell project, working to make mentoring connection between young people in the poorest county in West Virginia with mentors who are adults that they can trust and talk to in order to overcome hardships. High Rocks has spent the last year collaborating with the Greenbrier Restoration Council in order to open a community youth center in downtown Lewisburg, West Virginia that provides after-school services to young people including after school tutoring, community connections, college access and more. Those are just a few of the many relationships Sarah and High Rocks have developed over the last 19 years. Through building relationships with other community organizations, High Rocks is paving the way in teaching young people how to become confident adults and lead their communities into to a brighter future. One way that the young people participating at High Rocks are doing this is through the MLK celebration in Greenbrier County, where participants learn about the issues of and how to come together as a community to overcome racism and write a speech about social justice. High Rocks has been taking young people to the West Virginia legislature for events like Women's Day and Our Children Our Future Youth Advocacy Day to ensure that the voice of the young people in this area is heard by the law makers in their home state. Sarah knows that young people are our future and is working through High Rocks to give those young people the strong foundation to build the future they want for their families and communities.

The lesson that young people and many others in the region have learned from Sarah is that when you put the best of yourself into what you are doing, when it comes from your heart and soul and your head, you will be successful every time. Sarah's dream in life is to work herself out of her job: that one day rural Appalachia will not be held back by stereotypes, but will consistently have the resources and support available to be whoever we want to be and realize our dreams of the future. I've known Sarah Riley since I was a fourteen year-old girl, she did not give up on me and I know for a fact that she will not give up on her own dream until it comes true.

*- Letter of Nomination by  
Rena Anderson, High Rocks Alum*





“...I had heard about the magic of High Rocks for several years from various friends and colleagues before I ever met Sarah Riley or visited the campus. Then I heard Sarah deliver part of the keynote address at the 2010 ASA Conference at Eastern Kentucky University, and I understood more about why the magic was necessary and how Sarah was an important catalyst for making it happen. Her speaking style was relaxed and conversational while also engaging and urgent. She articulated the problems and potential facing the High Rocks service area with stark detail, compassion, as well as humor. I knew that I had to experience High Rocks for myself some day...”

- from letter of support by  
Tammy Clemmons, High Rocks Volunteer

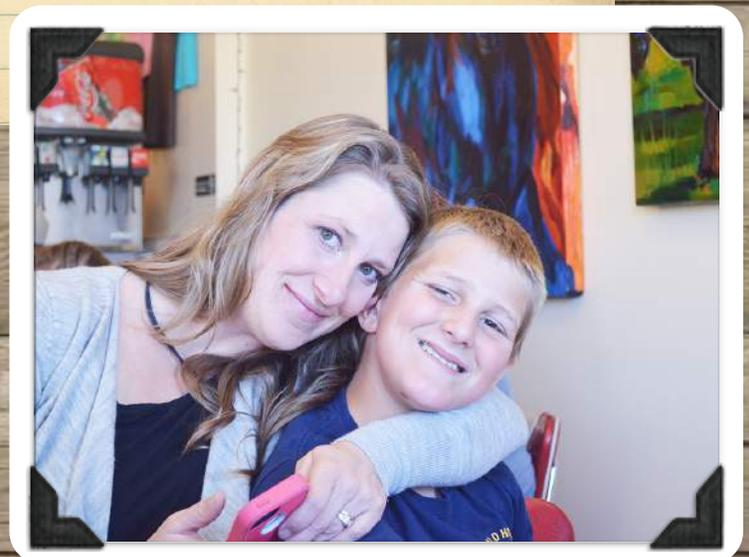
This award recognizes a person whose work is like Helen Lewis's—she has made exemplary contributions to Appalachia and community service. In the same words that we use to describe Helen Lewis, one letter after another describes this person's hard work and dedication, her devotion to our part of the world, her incredible generosity, her inspiring courage, and her contagious confidence. One called her "the absolute queen of tough love" and credited her with being the one who helped her to realize she had a voice and showed her "how important it is to use it." Another described this person as "the director that every organization wishes they had." This year's winner has made a tremendous impression on the lives of young people, girls in particular. become community organizers, business owners, nurses, lawyers, financial consultants and more.

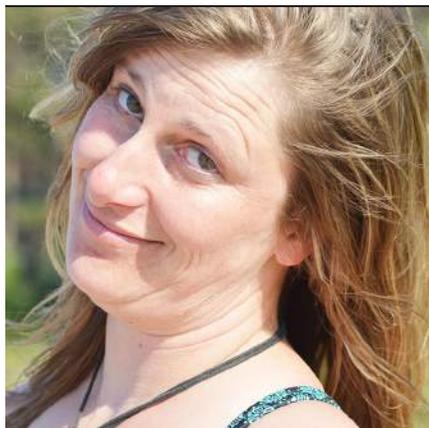
Our award winner is a founder of High Rocks Educational Corporation. High Rocks is an inspiring organization that serves 7th to 12th grade girls from 3 counties in southeastern West Virginia—that's the official description—but its reach far exceeds the boundaries of 3 counties and helps young people to "look inside themselves to find the courage" to make a difference and empowers them to "carry the lessons of High Rocks out into the world."

A host of letter writers from across the region wrote to describe Sarah's passion and her compassion, her effective community collaborations on the ground and her vision, her encouraging appreciation of a person's assets and potential.

Sarah Riley and High Rocks lead young people to have "transformative experiences." Last year alone, nearly 400 young people participated in High Rocks programs and served more than 1400 adult community members. Of the 2014 active High Rocks seniors, there was a 100% high school graduation rate—and furthermore, 100% of High Rocks seniors successfully completed their freshman years in college. Sarah Riley and High Rocks have changed the lives of many young people forever. As alum Rachel Tompkins says, Sarah makes a difference by "inspiring and educating new generations of young people to plant their feet in the mountains they love, to build stronger communities and make a positive difference themselves."

*-Presented by Sandy Ballard and the Helen M. Lewis Award Committee of Patricia Beaver, Julie Shepherd-Powell, Silas House, and Betsy Taylor*





“...Not only did Sarah play an important role in my life, but in the lives of hundreds of others. Sarah has gone from inspiring and empowering High Rocks girls from three counties to working hard in helping other counties and organizations across the state and region. There is no denying her unyielding support for West Virginia and Appalachia, her life and work are devoted to growing and strengthening her part of the world. I admire Sarah for her strong presence, confidence, and unrelenting spirit that she carries with her from the office at High Rocks and beyond. I have never witnessed anyone with more passion and devotion to my home than Sarah Riley; she is truly the definition of this award...”

- from letter of support by  
Kendra Taylor, High Rocks Alum

“As a High Rocks girl, I have seen Sarah Riley tackle many things, such as down in the dumps junior counselors, piles of paperwork, and potentially unfriendly donors with nothing but pure enthusiasm and smiles. She tackles each problem before her with equal parts incredible leadership and utter compassion. She has been an inspiration to me and is one of the most determined, spirited, dedicated ladies ever.”

- current High Rocks Girl



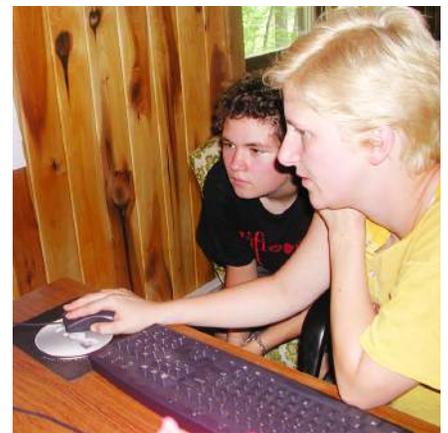
"I love her so much.  
I go to her for  
everything. Need  
help with chemistry  
homework? Wrote an  
essay that needs a  
lot of help? Just  
really need a hug?  
Go to Sarah."

- current  
High Rocks Girl

This past month I had the pleasure of attending the Appalachian Studies Conference where I got to see our director receive the Helen M. Lewis Community Service Award. Two of our High Rocks students were also present at the conference, making them some of the youngest participants in this incredible convergence of scholars and activists. Seeing their faces shine with pride as Sarah accepted the award made me understand how deeply High Rocks gives girls a sense of ownership over our organization. It is their stories of success and struggle that give High Rocks the credibility it has in the activist community, and it is their passion and determination that will carry the High Rocks mission through generations.

The Appalachian Studies Conference is a place where stereotypes are disrupted and new identities are forged. It is a place where thinkers, doers and dreamers come together to converge and cross-pollinate, to strengthen our movements through the sharing of knowledge, culture, and strategies for the crafting of a more just world. Most of all, the Appalachian Studies Conference is a nexus point for the region-wide organizing High Rocks is so deeply tied to. I am proud to be part of an organization that has been so exuberantly celebrated by this community, and I hope to return next year with even more exciting dreams to share.

- by Alice Beecher, High Rocks AmeriCorps Member





“It’s hard to imagine a High Rocks without Sarah, however, it’s not impossible. Sarah plans to work herself out of a job and I have no doubt that she will. She doesn’t settle for just doing her job incredibly well. She teaches others how to do her job and challenges them to do it better.”

- current High Rocks Girl

When asked what was it that prompted her and her mother to start an organization specifically for young women and why in West Virginia, Sarah responded,

“I was a young woman in West Virginia, and I knew it shouldn’t be as hard to grow up here as a smart, ambitious, dreaming-of-changing-the-world kid as it was for me. I wanted to grow up to be the person I needed when I was growing up.”





"...I came into the program in the summer of 2004, I had just completed my second year of 7th grade, my parents were in the middle of a very nasty divorce, and my oldest brother, who was only 20 years young, was killed by a drunk driver. To say my life was crazy was to say the least. I had absolutely no support system at home. I don't think my parents didn't love me, or didn't care, I just think they had a lot going on in their lives and they were handling it the best way they knew how.

My second year of High Rocks, I met Sarah. She always pushed me to go further and to reach harder. At first, I hated that she made me work harder and go further, but then I grew to love her and what she was doing. Sarah was more than a mentor to me she was a mom. I graduated high school in 2008 with a 3.25 GPA, I was very active in my community, High Rocks, JROTC, softball, and wrestling.

I applied for the year round AmeriCorps two years in a row, and got it. I was the one changing young girls lives, the way that Sarah changed mine, and the way she still continues to change my life.

I started college last semester, I would have never went to college had Sarah not pushed me in that direction while working for her. I can walk into High Rocks and sit down in Sarah's office and cry my eyes out about anything, and know that Sarah will help me problem solve, or will give me a hug that only she can give. I am now 26 years old, and I honestly can say, without Sarah Riley and High Rocks, I have no ideas where I would be or what my life would have in store for me..."

- from letter of support by Hannah Ormsbee-Walker, High Rocks Alum

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**ALSO A VERY SPECIAL THANK YOU TO ALL OF OUR VOLUNTEERS!**



*What is your most monumental personal achievement in your career at High Rocks thus far? Not award-like but rather something that happened that made you realize it was all worth it.*

"Every time I see a High Rocks Academy alum who is doing well for themselves and helping make the world better for others, I know it's worth it. It's worth it when I stop in the hospital and my PA is a High Rocks alum, when my financial planner is a High Rocks alum, and when the manager of my bank is a High Rocks alum. I know it when High Rocks alums are leaders working for justice, when a High Rocks alum starts an organization to help Haitians, when a High Rocks alum becomes a celebrated kindergarten teacher, or a mom, or a grants officer for a national non-profit. I know it when I see a High Rocks alum overcome addiction, graduate from college as a first-generation student, excel in a competitive physics PhD program, or go back to school as a non-traditional student. I know it when I see alums remove themselves from unhealthy relationships. I know it's worth it when I see them build healthy, happy families. I know it's worth it when I get to come to work every day and work with my former students, who are now program staff, board members, and volunteers running this incredible organization for another generation of young people.

I know it's worth it by the letters and facebook messages and long-lost hellos from alums, who like a ripple effect on a pond, spread the High Rocks message through the lives that they touch, in all the places that they are. I know it's worth it when I see the core of High Rocks spread through them in the world: love, the ethic of service and care, acceptance and tolerance, and thoughtful excellence. I know it's worth it when I meet their children, and see those pillars instilled in them as well. And I absolutely know it's worth it because it is important enough to all of them to tell me so." - Sarah Riley

***This interview was featured in Greenbrier Valley Quarterly this month when Sarah was one of nine community members to be awarded the inaugural Zenith Award. These awards were given to individuals that have dedicated their lives to their community's needs and have helped move the needle in their respective causes to create a better future, a better society, and a better life for West Virginians and Greenbrier Valley residents.***