

w e s t v i r g i n i a

# EXECUTIVE

**Facets of  
Bill Bright:**  
*A Business Legend  
Shares His Story*



# Reflections of Bill Bright

**B**ecause of the overwhelming success of his many entrepreneurial endeavors throughout his 44 years as a business capitalist, one could easily understand if Bill Bright's personality veered towards supremacy. However, once you meet Bill Bright, you realize nothing could be further from the truth. Upon that first meeting, one is instantly overtaken by the warmth and humility Bright radiates. Bright exhibits the type of southern hospitality and integrity that is routinely demonstrated in every company with which Bright is involved including: Winterplace Ski Resort, Glade Springs Resort and various real estate and resort developments.

At age 13, Bright discovered that the seed of entrepreneurship had been planted in this being, and today, without any inherited fortune, he has built a multi-faceted business portfolio through Bright Enterprises which represents the natural evolution of Bright of America, a corporation that manufactured and sold fund-raising products throughout the country and placed Bright on the path to success.

Bright is a graduate of West Virginia University and holds a degree in business management. While in college, Bright served as president of his graduating class, president of the Inter-Fraternity Council and was president of his fraternity. He also served in the Adjutant General Corp of the United States Army with the rank of Second Lieutenant. Throughout the years, he has served on various boards of directors and councils and has been a member of various organizations. For a complete listing of his civic involvements, go to [www.wvfirst.com](http://www.wvfirst.com).

Despite his many successful endeavors, Bright has no plans to rest on his laurels. Bright continues to do business in his hometown of Summersville, West Virginia, and has several exciting new projects in the works in an ongoing effort to improve the state and life for its residents.



**1951:** At age 13, Bill Bright starts his first business, electrically digging fishing worms and selling them.

**1959:** Bill and his brother, John, begin Church Graphics Productions by taking pictures of interiors of churches and selling them as Christmas cards to the churches for fund-raising efforts.

### Provide a brief background for Bright of America.

The first official company we formed was Church Graphic Productions in the fall of 1959 when I was a senior at West Virginia University. John, my brother, and I took pictures of the interiors of churches that were decorated for Christmas and made those pictures into Christmas cards. Each church's congregation would sell the cards the following Christmas to raise money. The process was intended as a fund-raising project, and, in time, we began decorating churches in the summer to look as they would during the Christmas season in order to extend our sales period.

In this beginning, Church Graphic

Productions was set-up as a direct mail business. We thought people might respond better if we had a second mailing address from a larger market, so we used a friend's mailing address in California as our 'West Coast' mailing address. Therefore, we received a lot of West Coast business, and Church Graphic Productions' tagline soon became, 'Photographing America's Churches Coast to Coast.'

**How did a college student at WVU acquire the money to launch a company of that magnitude?**

John and I actually started the business with \$500. What is most interesting is how we received financing to launch the business.

Before I graduated with a degree in commerce, I took Finance 111, and in the text book was a page and a half about the new wave of financing—accounts receivable financing, which was a relatively new concept



for banks in West Virginia in 1959. Most banks at that time were familiar with factoring, which is when the customer sends their payment directly to the bank, but we did not want the civic organizations to think we were pledging their accounts—this process would have confused them.

I showed the page and a half about accounts receivable financing in the Finance 111 book to Bernard McCutcheon, then president of Nicholas County Bank. I explained that if he loaned the money on this basis, we pledged that as soon as the customer paid, we would in

turn repay the bank for the loan. Of course, he had never heard of accounts receivable financing, but he said 'If people are doing this in big cities, then I want to engage in it as well.' As a result, we received a line of credit for \$2,500.

Shortly after receiving that loan, sales elevated to the point that we needed more financing.

So I returned to Mr. McCutcheon's office, and he raised the line to \$25,000, which was the most money the bank could loan an individual at that time. I asked Mr. McCutcheon, 'What am I going to do if we out-grow the \$25,000 line?' He said, 'Bill, don't worry about it. We'll just go across the street, and I'll show the Farmers and Merchants Bank how this works.' Therefore, I received a line of credit at Farmers and Merchants Bank,

then I visited the banks in Sutton, Gassaway and Richwood, and we secured maximum loans from all those banks. Finally, we borrowed money from a bank in Charleston because we had borrowed all the money we could from the smaller banks. Today, of course, accounts receivable financing is a huge segment of borrowing money for businesses.

**How did Church Graphic Productions lead to the formation of Bright of America?**

After graduating from WVU, I went to the



**1962:** Church Graphic Productions becomes Bright of America, a manufacturing company that produced hundreds of products designed for clubs and organizations to sell for fund-raising purposes.

**1976:** John Bright forms Brightcrest, a sister company of Bright of America, in Roanoke, Virginia.

Army as a Second Lieutenant through the ROTC program. After the Army, I went to law school for one year. At the end of that first year, we invented notepaper with printed scenes of West Virginia on the paper and began selling packages that consisted of 12 note cards with four views: a Rhododendron, the state capitol, Hawk's Nest and Blackwater Falls. We sold approximately 125,000 boxes of cards, which figures to be practically one card for every West Virginian. Because the concept was successful in West Virginia, we expanded the product by creating scenes of other states. With this new concept, we were able to grow the business with this unique product, and I decided not to finish law school. I saw the opportunity to develop these products on a national level by printing all the scenes on laminated placemats and other products as well.

Our main customers were nonprofit, civic organizations who sold the products as a means to raise funds for their respective groups, and, at the same time, promote the states in which they lived. The fact that nonprofits, such as women's clubs and 4-H clubs, were raising money and promoting their state was the part that really made the program successful. This led to our finding a niche product that really enabled us to bootstrap it, if you will, without having any capital to start a business.

Bright of America was actually formed in 1962 when we began producing other types of cards. Because selling pictures of states did not fit under the title of Church Graphic Productions, the company's name was changed to Bright of America.

### **At what point did Bright of America launch into a national company?**

Bright of America really grew and expanded its product line in the 1960s. The company's first plant was built in Summersville in 1966, and it was 50,000 square feet. By 1975, the plant was 210,000 square feet. At this point, Bright of America was manufacturing calendars, placemats, candles, note paper and greeting cards, to name a few. The company was manufacturing more than 30 million placemats a year and was the largest manufacturer of placemats in the country at that time.

In 1976, my brother, John, started another branch of Bright of America in Roanoke, Virginia, called Brightcrest, and this company was similar to the West Virginia company. In fact, we shared the same art.

### **What made you want to be an entrepreneur? What was it about you that made you want to go that extra mile to max out those loans?**

I had an interest in business from the time I was young. When I was 13, I started my first business by selling fishing bait. I had electric fishing-worm diggers, and I would place a wire onto a metal rod, run the wire back into a power supply, and place the electrified rod into the soil so that the fishing worms would come out of the ground. We had to be careful not to grab the rod when the power was on!

Throughout the years, it never really mattered much to me what business I was doing. People often ask 'Why did you start selling greeting cards?' My first business could have just as easily involved some other product—I

always had an interest in business, no matter what the products were.

### **How did you make the transition from the fund-raising business to coal mining?**

When John began his own business in Roanoke, the opportunity came for me to get into the coal business. I had worked my summers during college at coal mines and spent time inside coal mines with an engineer doing underground surveying. After the coal boom of 1974, I was attracted to the coal industry and started Land Use Corporation in May of 1976, which grew to be one of the largest independent coal companies in West Virginia. Today, that first strip mine is now a subdivision. We were environmentally concerned, surface miners who mined coal and, at the same time, improved the land. Our efforts are proof that surface mining can actually improve land and give it a different land use.

The coal business expanded significantly during the late 1970s. Prices in the coal industry in the 1980s plummeted, and as a result, there were many coal reserves available. At that time, we had both surface and deep mines and, therefore, we had opportunities to expand the business.

In 1988, we acquired the railroad between Clay and Burnsville because of the large reserve of unmined coal in that area. This acquisition enabled us to buy properties that were on that railroad, which led to our accumulating numerous coal reserves. We also had a river loading point that was on the Kanawha River which also helped grow the business.



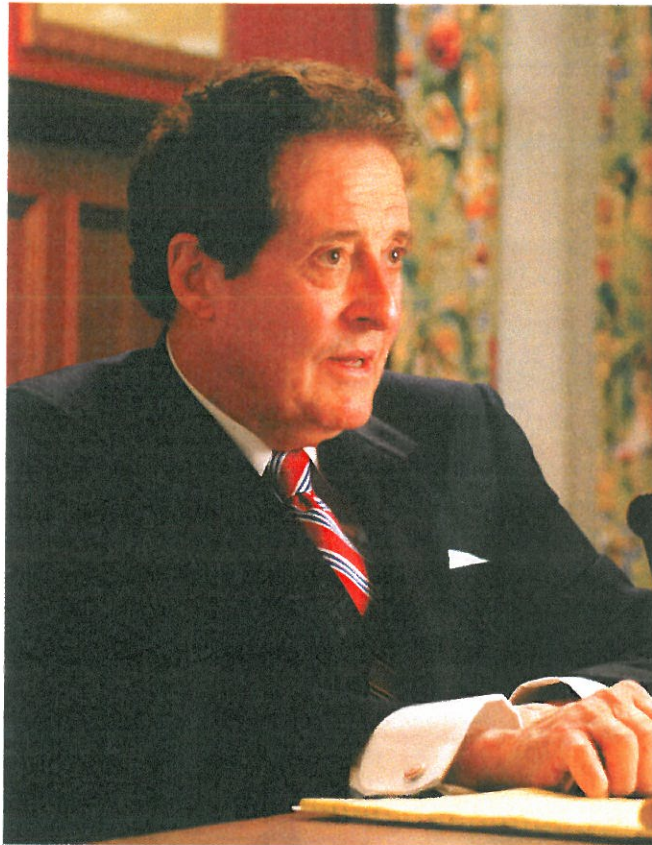
**1976:** Bill Bright starts Land Use Corporation, a coal company that grew to be one of the largest independent coal companies in West Virginia.

**1988:** Bright Enterprises acquires Elk River Railroad, a short line railroad between Gilmer and Clendenin, which is utilized to haul coal.

**How did you make the transition to tourism-related business with Bright Enterprises?**

The cornerstone of Bright Enterprises was the coal business and Bright of America. However, we sold the coal businesses in 1989 and sold Bright of America in 1990. Half of the coal company was sold to NERCO Coal Company, which was owned by Pacific Corporation, a large utility on the West Coast, and the other half to Consolidation Coal Company in Pittsburgh. Then on the September 18, 1990, we sold Bright of America to Russ Berrie, which was a New York Stock Exchange listed company. Because of those sales, I became involved in a number of different investment opportunities in West Virginia.

Bright Enterprises has diversified into a number of different investments, and we are still involved in the coal reserve business. The Elk River Railroad was part of what we kept when we sold the coal company, and we are in the process right now of negotiating the final details on connecting the railroad to Charleston. The railroad will soon go from Charleston to Burnsville, pick up coal through these areas, and take it either south to the Norfolk Southern or north to connect with CSX. Therefore, we have two railroads connecting to the short-line railroad. We have also recently invested in coal bed methane. The Bright Enterprises of today has numerous facets, including Bright Mining and Land Company, Bright Timberlands, Old Florida Plantation, Elk River Railroad, Winterplace Ski Resort and Glade Springs Resort.



**You were already very successful and wealthy at 50. Why did you venture into other risky business endeavors and invest in practically bankrupt companies, such as Winterplace and Glade Springs?**

I love doing business in West Virginia, and I cannot image doing anything else. I have no intention of retiring. However, I take a good bit of time off, enjoy frequent travel, and enjoy doing what I want to do. However, to retire and quit would not be sensible for me.

**Bright of America and Bright Enterprises have had diverse ownerships of various types of businesses. How do you become**

**educated in so many areas of business?**

First, not all that glitters is gold. It is kind of you to say that I do all these things in these different businesses, but I am not as proficient in as many as I would like to be. Acquiring these companies has been a learning experience, and that is why I say, 'All that glitters is not gold.' The public does not see the shortcomings of things that do not go right. Business people focus on the things that work, and there are many things behind us that did not work very well, but it is vital to stay focused on your goals and never give up.

**Was there ever a time when you thought you had failed?**

No, but it is difficult to feel good in business and remain comfortable when something is not going well.

The reason people work extremely hard to make things right is because they do not like the feeling when things go wrong. I usually try to find the good in any bad, and if someone looks hard enough, almost every problem has something positive that will surface. People must stay committed long enough to give a negative situation time to turn around. This philosophy is part of Bright Enterprises' culture.

**When Bright Enterprises acquired Winterplace Ski Resort and Glade Springs Resort, the two were practically bankrupt. Why do you believe Bright Enterprises succeeded where others failed?**



Bright Enterprises was fortunate to have a solid capital base and, as a result, had the time to make mistakes and correct things. Also, sometimes there is benefit to not knowing a lot about a certain business because it leaves room for innovative approaches—on the other hand, we are fortunate to have Terry Pfeiffer, who has years of experience in the ski business, to lead Winterplace. I drew from his vast knowledge, and he benefited from my out-of-the-box thinking, which brought together the best of both worlds. Bright Enterprises continues to see growth, but I still do not believe our businesses are all that they can be, but I am never quite satisfied.

Part of my success comes from investing in the right people. There is an important relationship of trust and loyalty among all the partners. When hiring people or choosing partners, the most important things to consider are integrity, intelligence, desire and hard work. My partners for the companies of Bright Enterprises are: Ed King, who began as chief financial officer for Bright of America in 1974, was president of the coal company and is now vice chair for Bright Enterprises; Jim Davis, who was the chief financial officer for the coal companies and is now president of Bright Enterprises; Frank Jorgenson, who joined me as president of Bright of America in 1987 and has been president of the railroad since 1993 and is president of Glade Springs Resort; Brian Johnson, president of Bright Development and responsible for home building and

other development projects; and Terry Pfeiffer, who is president of Winterplace. I am also happy to have my oldest daughter Anne and her husband, Darren Campf, to join me in helping manage Bright Enterprises.

### How do you evaluate a business you believe to be successful?

One important factor for evaluating a new venture is whether the company will be doing something that is unique—a niche that sets the company apart from the competition. Once that niche has been identified, it is important to strategically build a fence around a business's downside and strengthen its

When evaluating a new venture capital investment, Bright Enterprises has a policy that we will look at any venture that has a business plan. We consider these points: Is it unique or is this a business most other people are already doing; Is there something new that is a value-added niche to an existing business; and what are the upsides and downsides of this type of business?

I encourage more entrepreneurs in West Virginia to come forward with businesses that take some existing service, need or product and make it better. The same goes for inventing a new technology or improving a not-so-successful business already in existence. I believe Winterplace is a good example of such an improvement method.

**Please tell us about your plans for another ski development in West Virginia.**

We have been looking for some time at three different locations in the northern part of the state for a four seasons resort. In fact, we have already trademarked the names Almost Heaven Ski Resort and Almost Heaven Mountain Resort.

The benefit of these ski areas is that all three areas will have an extra-long vertical, which is the measurement from the top to the bottom of a mountain. These sites will have more skiing terrain and will have longer runs than normal areas in West Virginia. This project has been ongoing for a number of years—in terms of both investigating the best sites and determining whether and how to go forward with the project.

At this point, there is no guarantee we are going to proceed with the project. There are still things that need to be considered, and we are still looking at all three areas. I hope to report some time in the near future that Bright

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upside. Although I am inherently optimistic, I will always develop an exit plan for and method to handle failure in a particular company. Never go into business without knowing what to do if that business does not go well.



**1992:** Bright Timberlands is organized to invest in West Virginia timberlands.

**1992:** Bright Enterprises purchases Winterplace Ski Resort and turns the resort into a tourism destination point for Southeast skiers.

**1993:** Bright Enterprises buys Glade Springs Resort out of bankruptcy to employ hundreds of West Virginians.

Enterprises is going forward with the project, but at this point, there are still too many unknowns.

**How will the ski resorts of the future be different from those of today?**

Environmental protections continue to be of great concern with these projects. West Virginia has nothing more important to sell than the natural beauty of the state. If companies are not kind to the forests and the surrounding area, people will no longer visit

West Virginia for its natural environment. People in the tourism business are concerned about preserving the state's natural beauty, so I think the ski resort of the future will focus on those concerns.

**Do you believe West Virginia has enough funding for tourism, and if so, how can we advance the tourism industry further in this state?**

The Division of Tourism has done a tremendous job in the past 10 years, and as a mem-

ber of the West Virginia Tourism Commission, I have had an opportunity to witness the growth of the industry and the improvement in the promotion of tourism. West Virginia's Division of Tourism is one of the finest state tourism divisions in the country, and the division's advertising efforts are more focused than before. We no longer invest in markets that are extremely far away, such as Oregon, Washington and California. The advertising budget should be invested in major markets near West Virginia. Today, advertising is becoming more focused in the

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areas from which West Virginia draws most of its tourists, such as Virginia, Maryland, Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania, Ohio and all of the other nearby states. That is where we promote wild, wonderful West Virginia!

A second positive aspect of tourism growth is the tourism co-op grant program, which has given tourism businesses throughout the state the opportunity to directly market tourism attractions and activities. The program has enabled people to receive matching dollars toward direct mail, radio and television advertising. Tourism is the fastest-growing segment of West Virginia's economy and is a sustainable, long-term economic activity for the state. It is good for both the economy and for West Virginians. You can travel throughout the world and not find anything more beautiful than West Virginia's natural beauty.

**Let us discuss your leadership style. Is**

**there a particular management philosophy to which you subscribe?**

Throughout time, people develop their own management culture. I encourage mistakes; I tell people it is okay to make a mistake and to be wrong. If you can show them your own blemishes and mistakes, it encourages them that they will conquer the challenges that

**“Coal will continue to be a large part of West Virginia’s economy for many years to come because there is more ‘easy-to-mine’ coal in the state, as well as in other states in the East, than people realize.”**

come with making mistakes.

My leadership style is probably a bit more autocratic than many other managers. I subscribe to goals and delegation, and I do let people make their own mistakes. However, if

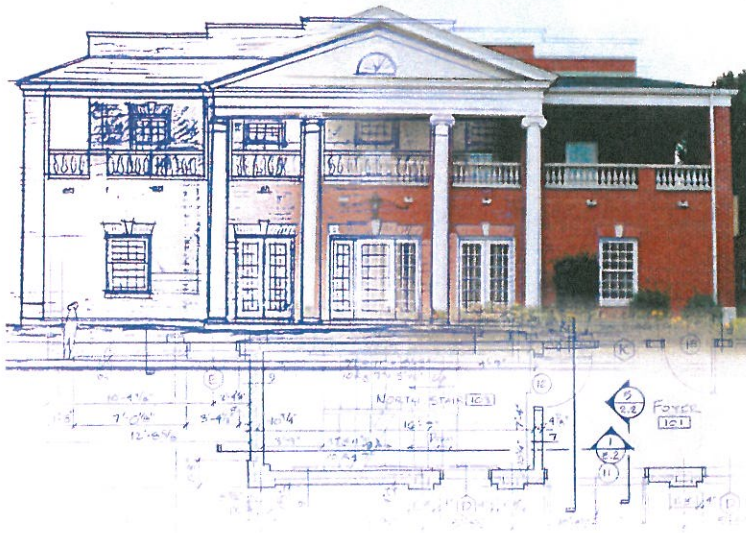
I foresee someone is going to make a big mistake, I do intervene rather than having them fail. In addition, I encourage people to voice their own opinions. Some of my best decisions come from changing my mind. Many times people do not change their decisions because they think doing so is a sign of weakness. However, if someone is open to change, he or she might discover a better way to do something.

**What is your proudest moment in business?**

The proudest moment was when we sold the coal businesses and Bright of America in 1989 and 1990, and as a result, we positioned ourselves to create a diversified portfolio of investments.

In the past, Bright of America and Bright Enterprises had built sizeable businesses, but these businesses did not give us the capital liquidity we needed. Selling the two businesses put us in a position of being able to invest

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**2001:** Old Florida Plantation, a 3,500-acre master planned community, is under way for 4,850 dwelling units located near Lakeland, Florida.

**2003:** Bright Enterprises considers purchasing land in Northern West Virginia to open Almost Heaven Ski Resort and Almost Heaven Mountain Resort. Plans to open the resorts are not final.

in a number of different areas. It was the right thing to do at the right time. The coal business was consolidating. Big coal companies were becoming bigger, and this trend has continued for the past 10 years. Therefore, it was the right time for a smaller coal company to divest itself.

**What advice would you give to young business leaders in this state?**

Do not give up or even think about giving up. I once read that businesses failed because the CEO gave up. When these CEOs looked back, they thought that if they had not given up, then they could have made it successful.

My passion is what makes me want to continue to work—fixing things and making them work, which is what I enjoy doing, and it is a great feeling to overcome some obstacle or challenge.

**Who were some of your important mentors in life?**

My father, who worked as an office business manager for a coal business called Richwood Sewell Coal Company, which was part of Oglebay Norton, was my greatest mentor. He retired at 64 and then worked with my brother and me until he was 80 years old. He had a strong influence on me and showed me that I could compromise on some things, and situations did not have to be handled exactly as I wanted them to be. There were times when, to put a deal together, I needed to compromise more than I would have otherwise been willing to, but my father encouraged me to compromise, which inevitably made me more successful. My father also made me think that I could do just about anything that I wanted to do.

Also, I greatly admired Terry Seelinger, who was a highly successful mine operator for deep mines. When I first began my career in the coal business, he would say, 'Why in the world is Bill Bright getting in the coal business? He does not know anything about it. He makes greeting cards. This is going to be a big mistake.' One day, he came to where Land Use Corporation was mining and admitted that he was intrigued by the fact that we were doing a good job, and he wanted to buy some coal. We soon became friends, and Land Use Corporation actually mined some of his coal properties.

**If you could pinpoint things in your life that helped foster your success, what would they be?**

I do not think there is anything more important than self-image. The way you see yourself is most important for success. I always envisioned I could do certain things, and as a result of that, there have been times when I was able to accomplish things that would not have been possible unless I remained confident in my abilities. I subscribe to the power of positive thinking.

**What did you learn from some of your challenges?**

I have learned you can do more than you think you can do—I learned that playing basketball. I was a small basketball player in high school, and when I graduated, I was five-foot and five inches tall and weighed 117 pounds. What I learned in basketball is that when the ball goes across the floor and two opposing team members go after it, the person who captures the ball is the one who wants it more. I learned that it was not about the person's

size when it came to who got the ball. Business is a lot like basketball, in some respects. Most people can do more than they think, and in a crisis, it is amazing what a person can do when they focus.

**Does the education system foster entrepreneurship, or do you believe it is a talent people inherit?**

Entrepreneurship is not a talent people are born with, and I am not certain what makes some people more entrepreneurial than others. However, experiences when people learn they can succeed if they try harder than the other person helps those people to become entrepreneurial. I do not believe college, at least during the time I was in school, did anything to teach students about being an entrepreneur. They basically taught students how to work for someone else by teaching management practices, human resources and labor law, but the system taught nothing regarding starting a business or engaging in entrepreneurial activities.

**What is your personal vision for West Virginia?**

West Virginia has a great future, and there are two particular fields I believe have a great upside: the potential growth of the tourism industry and the potential growth of the retirement segment of population in West Virginia. Many people are moving to West Virginia to build homes for retirement in communities. Those two fields have not really been considered economic development until recently. Charles Longino, Jr., who is a guru of migration activities within the United States and a professor at Wake Forest, believes that each new retirement dwelling consisting of two people is equal to three and a half new jobs.



Retirement communities are a huge industry in itself, and West Virginia—because of its location to bigger populations—has the opportunity for growth in both tourism and the retirement segment. Dr. Longino's research also reveals that a preponderance of retirees want to retire in a geographic location within a day's drive from where they did live, so that they can regularly visit friends and family. West Virginia is well suited for that desire because of its geographic location within an easy day's drive to major markets and huge population segments.

Another aspect that is a little different subject is the quality of the work force and the quality of the people in West Virginia. West Virginians are hard workers who have a great work ethic. I believe that West Virginians come home at night and brag about having worked hard.

#### How do you see the future of coal in West Virginia?

Coal will continue to be a large part of West Virginia's economy for many years to come because there is more 'easy-to-mine' coal in the state, as well as in other states in the East, than people realize.

Our nation's energy policies are going in the right direction, but nobody wants to have an energy facility near them, which makes things difficult. I would like to see this country be more self-sufficient on energy than we are. I believe coal is extremely important in finding the energy solution for the next 100 years.

While the coal industry is doing a good job, we have missed an enormous opportunity by not using reclaimed land from surface mining in West Virginia. Thirty years ago, there should have been a concerted effort to have the people moved from the floodplains in the hollows to the usable land that was being created by surface

mining. No one has taken the initiative to do that, so the floods wash out people's homes. Then FEMA rebuilds new homes in the same hollows, and these homes again are washed out 10 or 15 years later.

I do not understand why there has not been an effort to allow people who live in the hollows to move to the tops of the mountains. It certainly would have been much more econom-

Summersville—there are no scars from surface mining, and there are nearly 60 houses on that property. Go to Craigsville and look at the three manufacturing plants located on what was a large surface mine. At both of these reclaimed surface mines, you can see no evidence of where the mine previously existed. These are beautiful sites for the largest plants in Nicholas County.

#### What is next in Bright Enterprise's future?

A lot is happening at Glade Springs Resort, and we are proud that the lodging and the dining facilities have been dramatically improved. In addition, the resort has just added a second championship golf course, which gives the resort much more appeal. Glade Springs Village, which is the venture we have with Cooper Communities, is having significant success and many lots are now developed and sold. We have more than 4,100 acres at Glade Springs and we expect our venture with Cooper will build the third golf course in a few more years. Therefore, we see many exciting things happening with both tourism and retirees, and then we have the potential of a ski area in Northern West Virginia—we should have plenty to keep us busy.

#### Is there anything else you would like our readers to know?

Yes, I would like to say I am flattered that you wanted to interview me, and I want to also say how much I enjoy reading *West Virginia Executive* maga-

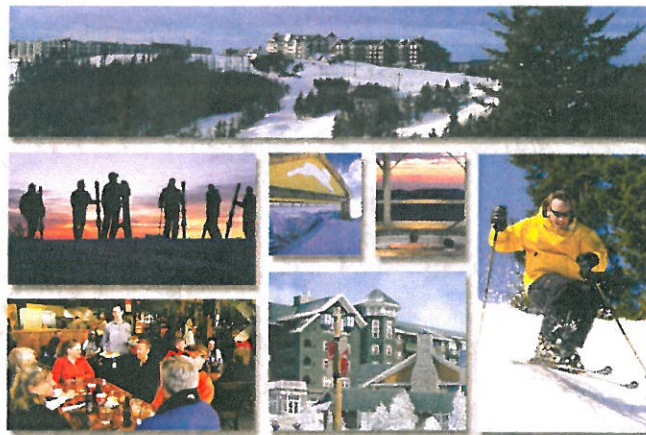
zine. I think your magazine is great for West Virginia.

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ic and kinder to the people than rebuilding their homes in the hollows. There has been a struggle with the use of land after it has been surface mined, and people do not recognize the value of the land after it is surface mined. Look at Bright Mountain Estates in