

After Sallie: Grandmothers carry on the fight against coal ash contamination from Alabama Power's Plant Barry

**21 million tons of toxic coal ash sitting just 20 miles upstream
from Mobile Bay**



**The Coal Ash Action Group; a grassroots movement born from Sallie Smith's
determination to protect the waters that shaped part of their lives.**

PHOTO COURTESY OF SAVAN WILSON

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Editor's note: "Sallie's Ashes" will premiere at the Fairhope Film Festival on Nov. 13 during an opening-night cocktail event, with a public screening to follow on Nov. 16.

When Diane Thomas talks about Mobile Bay, her voice carries the kind of affection that comes from a lifetime spent by the water.

A retired clinical psychologist, Thomas has lived along the bay for more than 30 years — swimming, crabbing and chasing jubilees on the shore.

"I was a bay rat," she said with a laugh. "My grandkids swim in the bay, I swim in the bay. Some people tell us they wouldn't eat seafood from here, but I do."

Thomas is one of three Baldwin County women continuing a fight that began with their late friend Sallie Smith. Together, they lead the Coal Ash Action Group; a grassroots movement born from Smith's determination to protect the waters that shaped part of their lives.

At 80 years old, facing terminal cancer, Smith refused to stand by as 21 million tons of toxic coal ash remained in an unlined pit at [Alabama Power's Plant Barry](#), just 20 miles upstream from Mobile Bay. In the summer of 2022, she began recruiting her friends — Thomas and retired university professor Savan Wilson — to help her take action. By October of that year, the women had drafted an action plan. Within months, they had a name, a website and a mission that resonated across the Eastern Shore.



Friends Diane Thomas, Savan Wilson and Kristin Koppen continue the fight their late friend Sallie Smith began, determined to protect their community from coal ash pollution.

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"This is a fabulous place to live," Wilson said. "The energy here and the kind of people you meet are astounding. Getting involved in this group has been one of the most important things I've ever done."

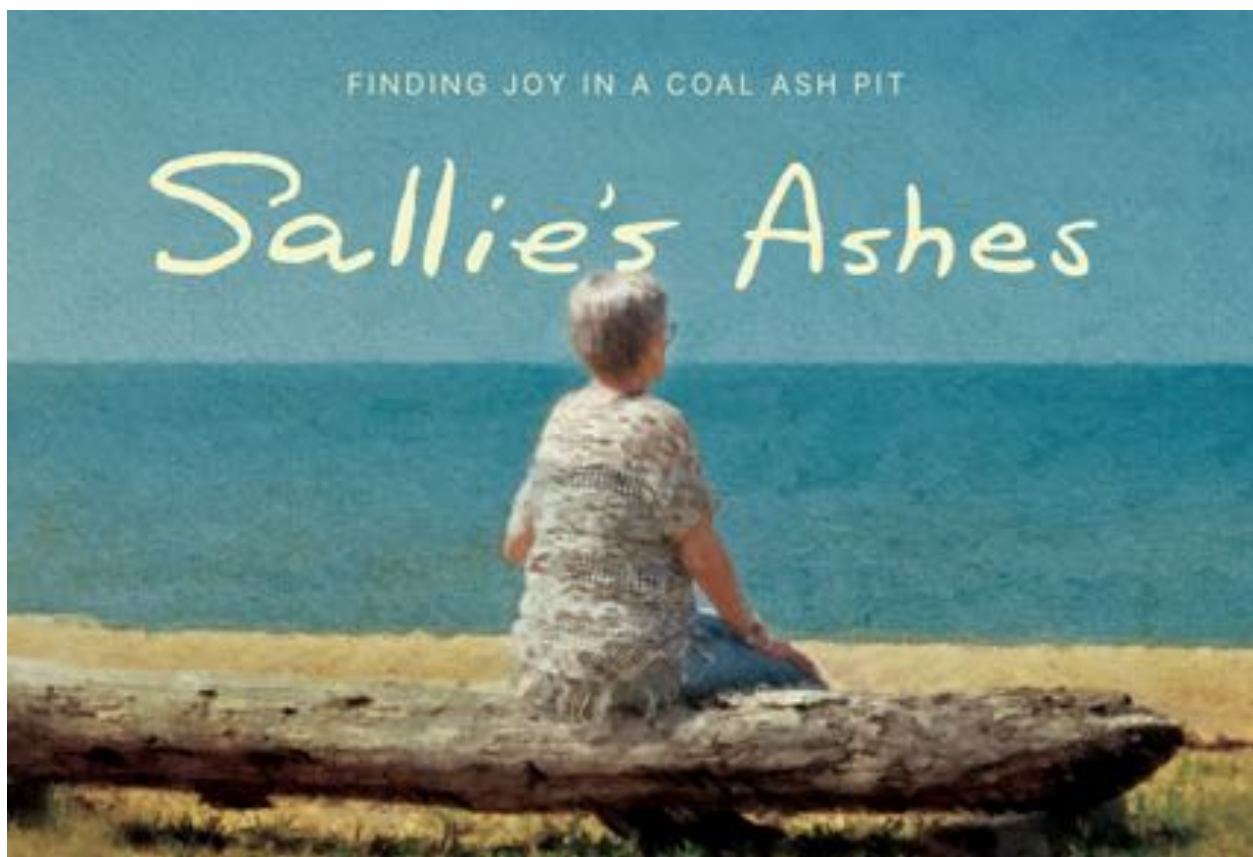
Kristin Koppen, a business owner who met Smith at the gym, joined the cause soon after. Originally from St. Louis, she and her husband had moved to the Eastern Shore seeking a slower life near the water, and soon found themselves swept up in the movement Smith started.

"Now that we have more time, we can give it," Koppen said. "It's been a blessing to be part of something that truly matters."

The group's story, and Smith's final months, are now the subject of "Sallie's Ashes," a 40-minute documentary that premiered at the Telluride Film Festival in August. The idea for the documentary began with a simple request: a three-minute interview with Alabama Public Radio. A journalist asked Smith, Thomas and Wilson to share their story, and the interview caught attention quickly,

ultimately being picked up by NPR. That broadcast reached filmmaker and producer Daniel Junge, who reached out to explore turning their story into a film. From that small interview, "Sallie's Ashes" was born.

It is set to screen at the Fairhope Film Festival on Nov. 13 for an initial release cocktail party, with a regular showing following that same weekend on Nov. 16. Directed by Louisiana filmmaker Brennan Robideaux and produced by Oscar winner Daniel Junge and Allison Bohl Dehart, the film follows Smith, Thomas and Wilson as they turn personal struggle into environmental action, rallying a community of "Alabama grandmothers" to take on one of the state's most urgent environmental threats.



"Sallie's Ashes," set to screen at the Fairhope Film Festival on Nov. 13 for an initial release cocktail party, follows Smith, Thomas and Wilson as they turn personal struggle into environmental action, rallying a community of "Alabama grandmothers" to take on one of the state's most urgent environmental threats.

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The women's work began in July 2022, when Smith first reached out to Thomas and Wilson. By October, the trio had drafted a formal action plan, mapping out public presentations, petition drives and community outreach. By April 2023, the

Coal Ash Action Group had been officially named, and by June 2023, the team had expanded to include additional volunteers, including Koppen and her husband.

"People kept showing up with ideas, but there were no worker bees," Thomas said. "Savan and I decided that if we were going to help Sallie, we needed an action plan. Sallie was persistent — calling us at 2 a.m., texting us constantly with ideas. She wanted to see action, not just conversation."

Their work included booth events at festivals, presentations to local groups and Earth Day outreach. They created shirts that read "Ask me about coal ash," built a website to track supporters and sent out regular email updates to a growing subscriber list. Today, www.MoveTheAsh.com has more than 1,500 subscribers.

The threat they fight is no easy feat. Alabama Power's Plant Barry contains 21 million tons of coal ash, stored in an unlined pit with only a single dirt dike keeping it from flowing into Mobile Bay. To help people grasp the scale, Thomas often measures it in football fields.



Thomas, Smith and Wilson during the filming of "Sallie's Ashes."

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"It's 21 million tons," she said. "That's like 451 football fields. If that dirt dike failed — like it has in other places in the U.S. — the devastation would be unimaginable."

During recent elections, Thomas noticed local candidates openly calling for the coal ash to be moved; a change she hadn't seen before.

"For the first time, I saw a number of people go on record saying, 'Move it, get it off the river,'" she said. "That was tremendous. Public opinion is beginning to shift."

Thomas and Wilson credit Smith with giving them a sense of purpose that has defined the past three years.

"I feel this way. I think Savan does too," Thomas said. "Sallie gave us a great gift, at this stage of our life, to be involved in something that is so incredibly important. You know, it's been a heck of a lot of work, but I thank her every single day."

The women describe their efforts as both practical and deeply personal. Thomas's grandchildren swim in the bay she has called home for decades. Wilson moved to the Eastern Shore to be near her family. Koppen and her husband relocated for a slower life on the water. Protecting the bay, for them, is about legacy and family.

"Well, our grandchildren won't be able to swim in the bay," Koppen said. "Our great-grandchildren won't. That made it important to us."



Thomas, Smith and Wilson during the filming of "Sallie's Ashes."

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Their strategy has been straightforward: raise awareness, educate the public and hold corporate and governmental actors accountable. The group has presented

at community gatherings, hosted informational tents and even advised political candidates. Each effort reinforces the urgency of their mission.

Through it all, the women often reflect on the friend who started it all. Smith passed away in October 2023, but her vision continues to guide them.

"Sallie didn't know how to retire," Wilson said. "When she saw something that needed to be done, she just did it — and she made sure the rest of us did too."

The women of the Coal Ash Action Group plan to keep doing exactly that.

Gabriella Chavez is a Report for America corps member who writes about growth and development in Baldwin County and our natural spaces for Gulf Coast Media. Your donation to match our RFA grant helps keep her writing stories like this one; please consider making a tax-deductible gift of any amount today by visiting <https://tinyurl.com/yaf8yf5n>.



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