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Big Oil in Louisiana and a Community's Bottom Line

[Clarice Friloux](#) | April 6, 2000

My family has lived in Grand Bois, Louisiana, for the last hundred years. In 1990, US Liquids (then Campbell Wells) started digging big holes in our neighborhood that eventually looked like Olympic-sized swimming pools. At the beginning we didn't realize that the facility was dumping hazardous material from oil companies. They told us it was mud and salt water, and that they had liners in the pits to protect our groundwater. The state permitted this type of facility, so we thought it couldn't be anything dangerous.

As the years went by, the community became more aware of chemicals that were harming us. Everyone was sick—sore throats, burning eyes, headaches, dizziness, nausea, diarrhea. Convoys of trucks were bringing in waste daily, and the smell was everywhere. In March 1994 we decided that it

was time we stood together and fought for our lives. We called in the state troopers and reporters.

At that time, none of us in the community knew what a councilman was used for. We didn't even know our sheriff—we had no need for any of that. When my sister-in-law and I first went to see our councilmen, we were nervous because we had never spoken in front of people. They told us that we needed to hire an attorney or we would never get anywhere. Laws would have to be changed, they told us, and the best way to do that was to take the facility and the oil companies to court.

We filed a lawsuit against US Liquids and Exxon, one of the oil companies dumping waste in the [print](#) y. We originally thought litigation would make a difference. We thought people would see that it [email](#) e to stop allowing these companies to do this. But in Louisiana, oil and gas is our number one ry. We are fighting some big people here. In fact, I think our litigation has hurt the larger ple against the industry in the long run. We have raised awareness, but it is clear that the people th Louisiana will keep fighting for their oil and gas, no matter what. It doesn't matter how many unities are being poisoned, as long as their husbands and wives are bringing in those big ecks. They can sleep on it as long as it doesn't hit home. You can't get a jury to sit on a trial in Louisiana that hasn't been affected by the oil and gas industry. They think that if they hurt 1, Texaco, or Chevron, they are hurting their jobs. They sympathize with us, but in the end, en sympathy and a paycheck, people come in second.

one to the state capital over and over again. We are trying to change the laws, but it hasn't d. Our state legislators are also part of the oil and gas industry. I'm talking to deaf ears. They t me and say, "What are you doing here? Go back to your small town. You're just a bored housewife. What US Liquids and Exxon are doing is legal. This stuff has to be put somewhere."

Our main problem is our governor. He has stopped bills aimed at changing the laws for hazardous material. He tried to replace our district senator because the senator fought for us in Grand Bois. The governor has attempted to split us up and has attacked us personally. He ordered a bogus evaluation of our community, and these "findings" then came up everywhere we went. When I spoke at Tulane Law School, his representatives were there. Everything I said, they said differently, trying to embarrass me in front of the media. Other than this, the media, our senators, representatives, and local councilmen have all backed us 100 percent. We have also received a lot of help in getting our message out from local and national environmental groups.

The litigation process is so long. I have to give a lot of time to lawyers, to organizations, on the phone and in community meetings. A few times I have called up Glad Jones, our attorney, and said, "I'm not doing this anymore. I just want to forget about it. I want my life back." Sometimes when I had to buy the postage, envelopes, and paper for the community in letter-writing campaigns, I thought to myself, "What am I going to do for money for the rest of the week?" I have even felt threatened. Cars have pulled up and watched my house for a couple of hours. I fear my kids could be kidnapped coming off the bus.

It has been difficult. But even with all the frustration, I've never regretted filing a lawsuit against the facility. I continue to fight because my husband, my mom, and my whole family are from here. We are fighting this as a team. If it is not that way, if it is not as important to the next person, it won't work. Another important thing is hiring the right person to represent you in a court of law. Glad Jones is one

in a million and has been very good to us. He always makes the meetings here, every other month or whenever we need him. Some people had to leave the community because of medical problems, but the rest of us decided we were going to stay and fight. There are only 300 people and 94 homes here. We protect each other's property, we leave our homes unlocked, our keys in our cars. We love our community. There are no drugs or crime, and there's wildlife, hunting, and fishing. But our properties have no value anymore. We can't just leave and start all over again.

A year into the litigation I began to think in terms of our human rights being abused. I used to think it was just because most of us are Native Americans. Then when I started meeting other communities, I [print](#) to realize that we were not the only ones. Most of the communities who have environmental [email](#) ms like ours are low-income and minority. When I started seeing these communities being [email](#) yed just like mine, I realized that for all of us, our rights are being abused. The facility and the [email](#) npanies have taken away our clean air and clean water; every basic thing that human beings

am a housewife, and I have two small kids. I can only fight one part of the struggle, for our [email](#) nity and my family. I sympathize with what's going on in other communities, but I don't have [email](#) ne to fight directly for them. It is a shame.

ain goal had always been to get a closure of the facility, not damage payments. When, on [email](#) st 7, 1998, two days before the end of the trial, US Liquids offered us a settlement that included [email](#) ial closure, our eyes opened up really wide. Even if we continued the suit and won, we knew [email](#) ie judge was not going to give us any kind of closure. We decided against Glad's advice on the [email](#) settlement. Glad wanted to take them to the cleaners. But I told him that if they are offering us [email](#) closure, we would have to accept it. And if you knew the amount, you would know it was not about [email](#) the money at all. Today, the facility is only accepting 10 percent of the waste it used to take in—that is [email](#) the bottom line. We will also continue to use the courts against Exxon, with whom we did not settle. [email](#) Because we had not filed a class action suit, but instead brought a case with just ten claimants, we can [email](#) bring a case against them with ten other people. And we can keep doing this, ten people at a time, for [email](#) another 30 years or whatever it takes, until that facility is totally closed down and cleaned up.

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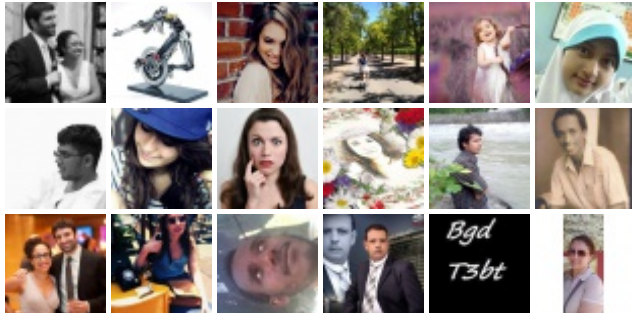
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