



THE BULLET WE DODGED

How the cement war was won.

BY SAM PRATT

A few weeks ago I ran into a Claverack friend, Howard Brandston, in front of the post office. We hadn't seen each other in a while, and embraced like soldiers who had fought together in the World War I trenches of the Somme.

Considering the pitched battles that seem to consume the mid-Hudson Valley every decade or so, I'm tempted to form an organization called the VLW: Veterans of Local Wars.

In the 70s, citizens challenged a nuclear plant proposed across the river in Cementon. In the 80s, members of SHOW (Save Hudson's Only Waterfront) questioned the wisdom of letting Octane Petroleum build a vast refinery at the river's edge. During that same decade, other activists were busy investigating solid waste incinerators slated for Stockport and Stuyvesant. In the 90s, concerned residents exposed a plan for a toxic waste processing plant at the site of the old glue

factory in Hudson's South Bay.

And between 1998 and 2005, residents all over the Valley, and their downwind neighbors from Connecticut to Maine, mobilized to challenge the massive, coal-burning, \$300 million St. Lawrence Cement "Greenport project". During that nearly seven-year period, it became almost impossible to have a conversation that did not turn eventually to the cement plant.

In each of these cases, citizens were told that the project was inevitable—a "done deal". Each of these companies were said to be vastly wealthy and influential, politically wired in. Defeatists said you couldn't fight City Hall. But in every one of these controversies, the supposed minority eventually became a majority, and the people prevailed.

The pattern in each fight was nearly identical, and went something like this: At first, the press only reported the company line, with Town, County and State officials dutifully toeing that line. Jobs, jobs, jobs was the mantra, plus some token assurances that all environmental rules and standards would be "met or exceeded." The few who dared ask even basic questions were immediately branded as a "strident" and "vocal" minority. Those who only wanted their politicians and regulators to do a little due diligence were labeled CAVE People (Citizens Against Virtually Everything) with BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anyone) and NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) attitudes.

But as the Hudson River's bard Pete Seeger likes to say: NIMBY should be spelled with a second "I", standing for "Now I Must Be Involved".

And that's my answer when people ask how we stopped the cement plant—despite the fact that SLC's parent was the largest cement manufacturer in the world, despite the initial widespread support of political officials, despite the company's \$60 million expenditure on lawyers, consultants, experts, flacks, ads, mass-mailings, campaign contributions, charitable donations, and more—because everyone got involved. We won because ordinary residents decided to stand up like woodchucks on their hind legs, scent the air, and then dig in to our own home turf for a long trench war.

If there is another giant controversy in the next decade, the people will prevail again, but only because people power is not a passive cliché. It works. There's no such thing as a done deal when local energies are properly organized and channeled into a focused, comprehensive campaign.

But *how* does it work? The labor leader Cesar Chavez was often asked

the secret to his success at organizing farm workers. "First I talk to one person; then I talk to another person," was his standard reply. Confused, the questioner would repeat the question. But Chavez would simply repeat: "First I talk to one person; then I talk to another person."

Eventually the questioner got it. The "secret" of organizing relies not on any trick or scheme, but on the combined talents of many individuals working together as a community.

Naturally, any long campaign has to be constantly guided, shaped, strategized, narrowed, expanded, recast, reinvigorated, reimagined along the way. Often groups stumble at first over simple mechanical obstacles: group structure, personalities, fatalism, expertise, exhaustion, funding. But once a group gets its feet planted, and begins defining that home turf by beating the bushes for more like minds, anything's possible.

What follows is a partial chronicle, focusing on some of those who emerged from the Valley underbrush and made striking contributions to the cause. Their stories not only deserve to be recorded, but may also inspire the next generation of accidental activists who find themselves fighting the next life-or-death battle for the soul of our region. Naturally, a full portrait of all who gave their time, energy, courage and imagination (not to mention dollars) to stop the plant would be impossible. The victory achieved was an amalgam of countless individual contributors, which transcended any single contribution.

First, though, why was the cement proposal considered such a massive threat to the entire Northeast?

Dubbed "a new industrial city", the vast, sprawling complex would have featured a skyscraper-sized 40-story tower and a dozen other structures between 10 and 20 stories tall, atop Becraft Mountain, within a mile of the hospital, cemetery and thickly settled neighborhoods.

From that 406-foot stack would have belched a pollution-laden plume extending as long as six miles, roughly the distance from Greenport to Philmont in a direct line. This gun to our collective heads would have been loaded with 500 million pounds of coal annually, to pulverize limestone blasted from a 1,200-acre quarry nearly as large as the entire City of Hudson. "Alternative" fuels such as garbage, tires and hazardous waste could have been added to the cauldron—a side of incinerator to go with your cement plant.

This behemoth would have been connected to the Hudson waterfront by two miles of conveyor belts,

through wetlands and across three major City entrances. At the waterfront, 700-foot-long Titanic-scaled HudsonMax barges would have constantly offloaded coal, slag, and gypsum, while unloading two million tons of finished cement each year. Their wakes, fumes and noise would have endangered smaller craft on the river, and chased away residents trying to enjoy the adjacent public park. Meanwhile, back in Greenport, as many as 265 daily truck trips would have serviced the main facility.

By SLC's own admission, the plant sought permits to emit up to 20 million pounds of pollutants per year, including greenhouse gases such as nitrogen and sulfur dioxides, heavy metals and volatile organic compounds: arsenic, benzene, cadmium, chromium, lead, mercury and more. The medical staff of Columbia Memorial Hospital, following the lead of Drs. Jeff Monkash, Ira Marks, Michael Brown, Steve Kaufman and Stu Kaufman, concluded that emissions of fine particulate matter (PM 10 and PM 2.5) would result in more asthma among local kids, more premature heart attacks among older residents, and higher incidences of cancer among the general population.

Worse still, SLC and its Swiss-owned parent company Holderbank—now Holcim—had an appalling track record of fines for pollution and price-fixing violations. Whatever promises the company was making, it had broken similar promises to other communities worldwide. (The company had also used slave labor in Europe during World War II, and actively profited in South Africa during Apartheid.)

Looking back, it may seem bizarre that this project wasn't just dismissed out of hand. Yet none of this information would have become known in time to stop the plant—if it hadn't been for a cluster of fewer than 40 residents, who started to ask the tough questions avoided by the powers that be.

The Longtimers

Divide and conquer was SLC's key strategy from the get-go. The compa-plume blanketed the region's airwaves with inflammatory advertising, and filled mailboxes across five counties with what Hudson adman Tom Mabley called "commercialized hate mail" intended to ignite a culture war.

"Don't let a group of millionaires from New York City deny Columbia County good-paying jobs," blared one glossy postcard. Meanwhile, the Register-Star churned out vicious, willfully ignorant editorials in favor of their biggest advertiser on a nearly weekly basis, caricaturing plant opponents as elitists attending "wine

and brie" parties.

But plenty of local people remembered the bad old days of Hudson's cement era, when brown snow fell in winter, and widows grieved the early deaths of their breadwinning husbands. Hudson resident Al Cook, a silver-haired and gravelly-voiced former union chief who led the longest strike in the history of Atlas Cement, was among the first to express skepticism. Though neutral on the project at first, "Cookie" took a show-me stance, warning that "You can't trust these cement company bosses farther than you can throw 'em. Their promises don't mean nothing unless it's written down."

Others who had lived here all their lives stepped forward. Deb Novack, a realtor and popular local bartender, joined opponents' steering group after getting tired of hearing too much misinformation bandied about at Melino's Pub. Hudson matriarch Mary Lou Groll wore "Stop the Plant" buttons on her lapel to counteract some of her own family members' "Support the Plan(e)" banners.

Opponents were invited to speak everywhere from the Hudson Rotary Club to the Germantown Lions Club to the Ladies Auxiliary of the Elizaville Fire Department to the basement of St. James Church in Chatham, and no brie was in evidence. We were graciously hosted by Dave Staats and other members of the Federation of Polish Sportsmen, where our big annual picnic was held each summer. We were likewise well-treated by the ladies managing the former St. Mary's Academy gymnasium, the site of our yearly winter get-together, drawing over 500 attendees from all walks of life.

So while the company and its allies sought to distort the facts of the project and demean those who would have to live in its shadow, longtime residents stood alongside those who had lived here "only" ten, twenty, or thirty years, proving SLC's divisive rhetoric just as false as the rest of their far-fetched claims.

The Researchers

Whenever I'd spot Elizabeth Nyland opening the door to my office—in her usual long skirt, her hair in a bun, toting an armful of file folders bursting with Post-It notes—I knew that our knowledge of the economic side of the plant argument was about to take another quantum leap forward.

A retired analyst for companies like American Express, living on Route 23B, a couple miles from the proposed stack, Elizabeth focused her forensic skills on the economic claims buried within SLC's 800-page application. Through the careful work of Elizabeth and others, it became clear that the project wasn't

going to be an employment boon. The company already had 154 employees in the area, and with the new plant, the total would go up to 155, a net gain of only one new job. Bit by bit, volunteers like Elizabeth teased these facts out of the depths of SLC's own documents, turning the company's own words against it, revealing the contradictions within its claims.

Claverack's Ian Nitschke, whose deliberate Australian drawl and patrol-like gold eyeglasses were familiar fixtures at our meetings, used expertise developed at the State Public Service Commission to locate more ammunition. Ian dug up 1970s testimony about the failed nuclear project, which spoke to the immense

up. Not only did Moisha complete the project, she obtained a grant to finance printing of 20,000 copies, handsomely packaged with graphics by her son, Nicholas. Though some old Sierra Club rivalries briefly threatened to derail the project, and some allies almost balked at distributing it, in the end *SLC: Understanding the Impact* proved an indispensable tool for organizing both thought and action, conferring the authority of a book upon the opposition's research. Knowledge is power, and for citizens faced with a well-funded and politically-connected adversary, it's one of the few affordable weapons available—fighting the company's PR fire with blazing facts.

history of the Bay. His research raised serious questions about the SLC's title to illegally-filled acres along the river, and resulted in a major exhibit at the Hudson Opera House—*Seeing South Bay*. Don became keenly aware of the tendency of the past to repeat itself in Hudson. For one example, in the 19th Century, quarrier Fred Jones convinced Hudson officials to let him trash the Bay by running a railroad trestle across it by first threatening to lay the tracks on Allen Street—a strategy we're now seeing deployed again by Holcim in 2010.

Don's solitary work was performed against a more communal backdrop of interest in local history led by residents such as Carole Osterink, Ellen Thurston, David

One method devised for this purpose was leafletting and buttonholing neighbors on Saturday mornings at busy post offices around the region. Each week, I'd arrange to meet residents of a specific town—say, Cyndy Hall in Claverack, or Joan Hintermeister and Sally Drummond in Germantown—to meet me at their local PO, Our non-confrontational presence reached out to new constituents, showed our commitment to the cause, and put a human, recognizable face on the movement. It became a lot more difficult to believe the company's smears about opponents if you'd actually met one.

Opponents eventually gathered over 16,000 petition signatures, which were patiently transcribed

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cultural importance of the Hudson Valley, noting how pertinent it was to this new fight. He had also worked closely on challenges to the Athens Generating plant with Laura Skutch, a Sleepy Hollow Lake resident who stumbled across a then-little-known set of regulations: the State's 44 policies for managing lands within New York's Coastal Zone. Since the proposed plant would affect designated zones north and south of Hudson, these policies also applied to SLC. In the end, this was the legal handle we turned to stop the plant.

Taghkanic's Moisha Blechman, though diminutive and outwardly delicate, brought a fierce and seasoned activist will to the battle. She proposed an idea which no one at first believed would ever come to fruition: writing a comprehensive manual covering every essential detail of the cement project and industry. The idea was to have a single reference source for all the questions that were constantly cropping

The Historians

Willard Place resident Don Christensen came to Hudson in the 1980s with no intention of getting involved in local affairs. Relentlessly curious, and with fine radar for irony, he had always wondered how the once-fabled South Bay, which he could see from his back window, had been transformed from a stunning and economically productive inlet, into a degraded, polluted, landfilled swamp. Now the threat of SLC turned this casual question into a matter of fight-or-flight urgency.

Going through old deeds at the Columbia County Real Property Department, dusty files at the County Historical Society, spinning through acres of microfilm in area libraries, checking the archives of historic sites and museums, and quizzing astonished bureaucrats at obscure agencies such as the NYS Office of General Services, Bureau of Land Management, Division of Lands Underwater, Don unearthed the true

Kermani and others at Historic Hudson. Their keen interest in preservation was complemented by that of Kinderhook's Ruth Piwonka, responsible for most of the nominations of Columbia sites to the State Register of Historic Places, who spotted many holes in SLC's inventories of historic resources threatened by the plant. Groups such as Hudson River Heritage in Red Hook (then headed by Kate Kerin) and The Olana Partnership (led by Sarah Griffen), collaborated to make preservation another key reason to stop the plant.

The Go-getters

While some preferred parsing the SLC application, or searching the Internet for the company's latest environmental atrocities, others knew that the war could not be waged solely at our keyboards. It was essential for the opposition to have a human face, and to reach people who, at the turn of the 20th century, might not yet have email.

back at the office after each weekend's haul, by volunteers such as Gabi Hermann, Cynthia Richardson, Chet Stark and Alice Platt. The signer's name would be hand-written on an envelope containing a bumper sticker, a flyer, a donation form, and a copy of the petition for the signer to circulate as well. Before mailing, an employee such as Ann Birkmayer or Maiysha Kramer would enter the name and contact info into the database for future follow-ups.

Meanwhile, Jock Spivy and Ally Anderson-Spivy of Kinderhook were rounding up signatures on a separate National Cultural Petition supported by artists, historians, curators and others alarmed by SLC's threat to the Valley's "spectacular scenery and its seminal role in the development of America's culture and ideology." The signatories ranged from locally-based but internationally known figures such as poet John Ashbery and painter Ellsworth Kelly, to celebrity actors such as Harrison Ford and

Uma Thurman.

Activist clichés about “taking it to the streets” meant more than marching down Warren Street. Working with members of Columbia Action Now (an allied group in the northern part of the County) such as Spencertown’s Hannah Hanani, we took our fight to the sidewalks of Manhattan for a 2001 protest outside the Swiss consulate. Armed with proof that the proposal would not be allowed in the home country of SLC’s owners, residents held signs with humorous slogans like “Build it in the Alps” and “Chocolate, yes. Mercury, no,” provoking a panicked meeting with consulate staff and a great deal of exposure in the European press. Similarly, with the

Utah, cameras in hand—Lynn with her black leather jacket and long white tresses, Rudy with his shambling gait and radical sense of humor—bringing back proof of what life was really like in cement towns. They returned with photos of monstrous cement blight, and videos of downwind residents sharing stories of sick cattle and cancer-stricken relatives.

Many of Rudy and Lynn’s friends, such as photographers William Wegman and Annie Leibovitz, and musicians Philip Glass and Patti Smith, donated their talents to billboard campaigns and benefit concerts.

The arts were also enlisted at more grassroots levels. Photos of the

St. Lawrence outspent opponents by millions, but fortunately, their materials were both clumsy and insulting to viewers’ intelligence. One early pro-plant TV ad seemed to have been recycled from the 1950s, starring a housewife removing a sheet of chocolate-chip cookies from the oven and exclaiming, “I just don’t know how anyone can oppose it!”

Our side received key early assistance from marketing guru Ken McCarthy in Tivoli, and graphic designer Frank Aultman. Separately, the pair convinced us to be more ambitious than passing out a few hundred flyers here and there. Ken pointed out that so long as each mailing paid for the next one, it was free publicity. His experience in

ized on Thanksgiving morning.

OurTown’s Enid Futterman worked closely with Tom Mabley and filmmaker Tarquin Cardona to craft a second image campaign for the battle’s next phase. Enid expanded the slogan to: “Tell the Truth. Stop the Plant,” words which thereafter appeared on all of our materials and paraphernalia. The team produced two powerful TV ads to complement the print campaign, focused on children living with asthma and the lack of projected jobs. While the budget was a tiny fraction of SLC’s, the ads gave supporters a sense of empowerment, reached new constituents, and freaked the company out enough to compel them to produce a limp parody. John Isaacs designed the graphics



help of Jay Rasku of New England’s Toxics Action Network, Hudson residents like Leo Carlin stormed the belly of the SLC beast, delivering thousands of petitions by hand to chilly staffers at Holcim headquarters in Waltham, Massachusetts. Both actions were intended not merely as good political theater, but were part of an overall campaign to influence the company’s leadership to withdraw. Self-professed capitalists such as Dick Jenrette of DLJ, Christopher Burge of Christie’s and Craig Fitt of UBS, wrote jointly to Holcim board members calling the Hudson Valley a bad business bet.

The Creatives

Aiding in the Spiyvs’ effort were photographer Lynn Davis and screenwriter/novelist Rudy Wurlitzer, who constantly lent their creative talents and connections to the cause. The pair must have turned a few heads when they traveled to places like Midlothian, Texas and Devil’s Slide,

Hudson River by Freehold’s Thomas Teich were exhibited to help opponents pay to open a storefront office. Aerial shots of the local quarries and waterfront, as well as existing blight in Catskill and Ravena, were taken by B. Docktor. Opponents circulated blank plywood signs and stakes and Lisa Durfee, Alan Hamilton, Bridget Rockwell and two dozen others hand-painted their own “Stop the Plant” signs, which were then bid on by other members. These contrasted strongly with the mass-produced signage underwritten by a company that had to pay people to distribute and display its PR materials.

The Marketeers

In the first months after announcing the project, SLC’s launched media onslaught was intended to make resistance seem futile. But with the help of the many advertising and design professionals hiding out in the nearby hills, opponents were able to start to level the PR playing field.

direct mail also suggested, contrary to conventional wisdom, that we should err on the side of more information, not less—an approach which proved effective, since many were craving detailed rebuttals of the company’s ubiquitous slogans.

Frank similarly urged that we leave behind the bake sale mentality common to grassroots groups, and make two big leaps forward in awareness-raising. He designed an attention-grabbing flyer featuring a map showing where pollution from the proposed plant would likely fall, paired with detailed info about the potential health risks and the company’s track record. The investment in this 5,000-piece mailer, paid dividends for years to come, catapulting the group’s membership from double- to quadruple-digits, and providing supporters with a new sense of momentum. Frank also designed a series of billboards strategically located at all the major entrances to Hudson, one of which was vandal-

ized for the TV campaign, billboards and “Stop the Plant” lawn signs incorporating the new slogan.

In 2003, Germantown-based filmmakers Barbara Ettinger and Sven Huseby began making a documentary about Hudson, eventually shown on PBS under the title *Two Square Miles*. While they set out to make a portrait of Hudson without reference to SLC, they soon discovered it was impossible to interview anyone for more than 20 seconds before the cement plant came up. While their approach was carefully neutral, the presence of film crews all over town, had an interesting effect: People tended to behave a bit better when cameras were rolling.

The Converts

While much of the media and SLC tried to portray opponents as knee-jerk reactionaries, for most, the process of opposing the plant involved a slow, steady loss of faith in the company—paired with increased

trust in opponents’ credibility.

Claverack’s Mary Sanchez, who ran a lively and sometimes profane online chat site known as “Red’s Board”, described her change of stance in terms of the patience and decency of opponents’ responses:

“People took the time to answer my questions in a civil and thoughtful manner. Their answers made sense—and they could be verified with facts.”

“I started to look back at my involvement with SLC. After reading all the information I had found (not been given—but found), both good and bad, I asked myself that question that Jesse continuously asks: ‘Why is SLC good for us?’ I could not think of an answer... I got to thinking that big promises don’t always add up to big ‘keeps’.”

“It is my hope that some of the “pro-cement” folks will take some time to really really honestly think about this SLC project. Really think about this Santa Claus of a company promising you all you ever wished for. I do not believe that there can be a Santa Claus if there is no heart. Santa Claus would never use people. Santa Claus would never hurt people. St. Lawrence Cement has no heart, and they use people. They prey on their feelings and they are good at bringing out the ugly in everybody.”

It was also on Red’s Board that then-State Assemblyman Patrick Manning (R-Hopewell Junction) had his own epiphany about SLC. Manning had bashed opponents at a Chamber of Commerce breakfast at Meadowgreens, then got an earful back from disappointed constituents. He agreed to an hour online chat at Red’s, finally admitting that he would not want a project like SLC in his own town. Gathering his own facts, he consulted closely with doctors such as noted Cornell cancer researcher and Hillsdale resident Mitchell Gaynor, to understand the health implications of living near a major coal-burning facility, and then weighed in regularly and forcefully with State agencies against the plant. Another key public official, Hudson Planning Board chair and later President of the Common Council Michael Vertetis, began as a middle-of-the road plant proponent. But Vertetis (unlike his former ally, Mayor Rick Scalera) was careful to maintain a civil relationship with plant opponents, and showed an interest in having the City conduct a proper review. At first, many of us assumed that Mike was proceeding cautiously only to ensure that a botched process wouldn’t open the door for a successful lawsuit. But over time, the heavy-handed tactics of SLC (in particular their belligerent attorneys, Bob Alessi and Tom West) tended to alienate more moderate

supporters like Mike.

By keeping communication open with folks like Mike, our side maintained the possibility of his voting against SLC’s proposed Host Community Agreement, a package intended to buy the City’s support. That in fact happened on the same day that Secretary of State Randy Daniels found the project violated New York’s Coastal Policies, dealing a crushing double-whammy to the project on April 19th, 2005.

The Business Community

Opposition needed to be rooted in more than just environmental arguments. While some business leaders automatically supported the project without doing any due diligence, others took the time to gather facts and assess the situation. Farmers and realtors (including Steve Kingsley, who generously donated free office space when we were just getting our feet under us) were two early groups with a lot at stake, taking a stand against SLC as a threat to their livelihoods.

Germantowners Nancy Gordon and Paul Swendenburg, whose high-tech company HAVE, Inc. is located in Hudson’s former Simpsonville neighborhood, were among the first to step out of ranks with those businesses falling in line behind SLC. Before taking any position, they invited then-project managers Dirk Cox and Phil Lochbrunner to a discussion with me at their offices. They insisted on an open debate, with both sides present. After considering what they’d heard, Nancy and Paul issued a strongly-argued op-ed, setting forth precisely how the project would harm their business, and the commitment they’d made to employing local people. Richard Katzman, then a major employer in Hudson-Greenport, also gathered his own facts, and after losing confidence in the company, came out against it. He proceeded to underwrite the construction of a giant scale model of the plant, quarry and dock facility, and sponsored telephone polls (conducted by the same firm used by President Clinton and Mayor Michael Bloomberg) showing that by 2002, plant opponents had outnumbered supporters.

Toward the end of the fight, many of these same business leaders along with others such as Martina Arfwidson of FACE Stockholm, Don and Marnie MacLean of Thompson-Finch Farm, Deborah Bowen of The Inn at Green River, and David Rubel of Agincourt Press, worked with us to craft a Statement of Values for promoting greener, more sustainable development in the region:

To ensure continued growth and stability, we need to protect our high

quality of life. This includes a healthy environment and workforce, clean air and water, scenic and historic resources, and public enjoyment of our unique natural surroundings. [We conclude] that the overall scale, design, location and impacts of the St. Lawrence Cement facility proposed for Hudson and Greenport pose too great a risk of harming the health, quality of life, and economic viability of our region, and therefore it is not the right fit for our communities.

By the time this letter was presented to the State, more than 200 businesses representing over 1,150 full-time and another 450 part-time jobs in the area, had signed on. Their message was clear: in the mid-Hudson Valley, the fate of the environment and the economy are inextricably linked. We were fighting not only to stop something, but also to preserve the possibility of a brighter future.

The Experts

Citizens’ groups always are held to a higher standard of accuracy than slippery politicians. We knew we had to be painstakingly accurate in our public statements, and to back them up with full documentation and professional confirmations by independent experts.

One such expert was living right under our noses in Claverack: toxicologist and EPA consultant Travis Kline (son of Pamela Kline, founder of Traditions). Kline was asked to speak at an SLC forum, set up by the company in hopes that they’d control the dialogue and make opponents appear marginal and ill-informed. But the opposite occurred, as major public attendance forced the events to move to a large Columbia-Greene Community College auditorium. As panelists were peppered with tough questions from the well-prepared audience, they were emboldened to step outside the limited scripts SLC expected they’d stick to. Much to the company’s chagrin, Travis made a devastating presentation about the health risks of volatile organic compounds and products of incomplete combustion resulting from the burning of impurity-laden limestone and coal. Calling for a multi-disciplinary risk assessment and test burns, he warned that the existing regulatory process was inadequate to protect residents from harm. By his second forum appearance, SLC had lost control of the dialogue, causing some of its supporters to lose their cool. Four “young guys feeling their oats,” sporting the company’s free blue t-shirts, attempted to menace Travis, who was escorted out of the hall for his own safety by State Police Investigator and forum member Gary Mazzacono. These occasional and pathetic attempts at intimidation

only made SLC look worse.

While SLC expected opponents to bring nothing to the table, impressive experts were retained to back up our positions during official reviews. One day in 1999, Hudson art dealer John Davis had a visit from a loyal client named Gabe Miller. Gabe spotted one of our flyers on John’s desk and said: “You really don’t want something like this in your community. I know, because I build these things.” An NYU chemistry professor and senior engineer at Camp Dresser & McKee, among the largest international industrial consultants based in the Northeast, John arranged for Gabe to meet me for lunch at the St. Charles Hotel, whereupon we became the first environmental group ever represented by CDM. His firm’s work was supplemented by Dr. Alex Sagady, a pit bull of an engineer from Michigan, who represents citizens groups at discount rates. Alex’s preferred method of working was to file Freedom of Information requests with State agencies, then fly to Albany to camp out in the offices of the Department of Environmental Conservation, where he’d invariably find lots of useful information that bureaucrats, such as Project Manager Michael Higgins, had previously “overlooked”.

As our network expanded, similar finds began emerging on a regular basis. One after another, experts came to Hudson to educate our membership in public presentations: Neil Carman of the Lone Star chapter of the Sierra Club, Florida kiln activist and elected official Penny Wheat, Downwinders at Risk leaders Jim Scherbeck and Katy Hubener, Bonnie Sanders of South Camden Citizens in Action. Sanders, who died the following year, was particularly moving as she talked about her neighborhood’s experience with SLC:

“They spread around a lot of promises of jobs and grants for local organizations. They led our church pastors to think that this company would do good for minority residents. Once they had their permits, we learned that all they cared about was making money. We only gained a very small number of jobs. What we ended up with was pollution that made my grandchild, other kids and our seniors fight for breath, and truck traffic so heavy it shook house foundations. [But] even if SLC stood behind their promises, the hardships wouldn’t have been worth it. You can’t trust this company, and you don’t want them in your area.”

The Allies

From the start, we knew we couldn’t go it alone. The fight had to be expanded to the whole Valley and into the downwind states of New England. After a lonely couple of

years, one by one, more than three dozen groups stood with us—some contributing just their names, others biting off major pieces of the legal fight.

During one difficult winter meeting at City Hall in Hudson, a group of about five young, purposeful people in outdoor gear strode into the Council Chambers: Alex Matthiessen and his Riverkeeper crew had docked their boat and come up Warren Street like the cavalry to save the day. Meanwhile, at his office in Pittsfield, my all-time favorite conservation activist George Wislocki, founder of the Berkshire Natural Resource Council, used his decades of contacts and stockpile of credibility to convince EPA's New England Regional Administrator to issue a stern letter against SLC—and her support was echoed by the Massachusetts DEP and Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal. Across the river, Athens officials such as Andrea Smallwood and Chris Pfister opened up a western front against SLC by passing a Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan and submitting strong letters cautioning against Hudson impairing the State's investment in the Village's newly-restored park and docks along the Hudson.

The Go-to Guys and Gals

But for all the specialized skills and thoughtful analysis that go into long grassroots battles, possibly the most valuable asset of a citizens' organization is to have plenty of worker bees ready to swarm out of the hive at a moment's notice. We weren't lacking in that department. Whether it was an urgent mailing to get stuffed and stamped, or rounding up auction items for our next benefit party, or needing a small crowd to assemble for an unexpected meeting, or volunteers to help set up for an event, people gave generously and endlessly of their time: Warren Collins, Fran DeGrazia, Bob and Monica Mechling, Diana Jelinek, Dick Donovan, Claire Oravec, Chloe Zerwick, Jennifer Arenskjold, Marty Davidson, Martha Lane, Carole Clark, Hillary Hillman... This list could go on forever, and still be missing important contributions.

We also lost some of our most valued soldiers over the years: the hilariously wise Cassandra Danz (a/k/a Mrs. Greenthumbs); the fearless Bud Mann; artist Hannah Williamson; Phyllis Herbert, who never threw out a single article about the plant; and the ever-ready Vinny DeGrazia, our favorite bartender and raconteur. Their contributions live on each time anyone looks toward Becraft and still sees a hill, rather than a 1,200-acre hole in the landscape.

The Fun Part

Believe it or not, we did manage to

find some fun in this deadly-serious fight; we never would have made it if we hadn't. Printing up red "swat the plant" fly swatters. Painting signs in people's backyards and barns with leftover latex and scrap wood, and plenty of beer. Puzzling out Tom Koulos' sphinx-like letters-to-the-editor. Poking fun at the more absurd pro-plant arguments—like the claim that more pollution would bring more rain for farmers by seeding clouds with dust particles, or that the giant stack would draw industrial tourists, just like the Paris sewers. Opening the office for Winter Walk, with cookies and carolers. Rushing around during SLC balloon tests to spot the most devastating views of the dirigibles on 406-foot tethers. Clamoring up scaffolding to hang giant murals and banners in the gym before the big benefit. There was always lots to do, and a lot of gallows humor. Naturally we would have traded it all away to be rid of the threat, and go back to the quieter lives we led before anyone ever heard of PM 2.5. But getting to know our neighbors and finding creative ways to stave off destruction was a challenge that brought out the personalities and talents of everyone involved.

And Last but just the Opposite of Least

I've still not mentioned the person whose involvement and contributions I can fairly say stood above all others—Hudson art dealer and bass player Peter Jung.

For nearly seven years, despite the pressure to keep his own business afloat, Peter never said no when called upon for help, advice, or more of his time. I lost track of how many dozen times we loaded up his van with signs and flyers and posters—Jehovah's Witnesses, he called us—to spend an afternoon in the house of another virtual stranger, soon to be a good friend, talking about the world's driest subject, cement. We burned up the phone lines at all hours of the night, strategizing the group's next moves, dealing with some mini-crisis within the ranks, or crafting a sharp response to the company's latest nonsense. Weekends and holidays became irrelevant; there could be no letting up until we won. Peter was not merely a terrific sounding board, but also brought along a relentlessly-positive outlook and a special knack for boiling complicated issues down to their essence. One of his favorite spiels, after I'd done an exhaustive presentation of the gory details of proposal, was: "If any of this technical mumbo-jumbo has you scratching your heads, I got a good one for 'ya—just take a drive across the river down Route 9W, from the Ravena cement plant down to the Catskill facility in

Cementon. What convinced me to get involved was the devastation and misery that this industry has brought to those places..." Immersing ourselves in the particulars of Portland cement manufacturing was definitely not how any of us planned to spend the better part of a decade in the Hudson Valley, but Peter stuck with it through the exhilarating times and the exasperating, and for that I'm eternally grateful.

As for myself: I'm not going to pretend that an all-consuming crusade which overwhelmed every waking hour of my life for nearly seven years—79 months, all without pay—was not something of a *mitzvah*. Though that calling constantly put my name in the press and planted my feet in front of Senators and celebrities, it was seldom, if ever, glamorous.

This line of work entails walking around with a target on one's back, a willingness to be a lightning rod and take a lot of flack—in part, so that others didn't have to. It meant taking out the garbage and cleaning toilets in our first simple third-floor walk-up office, spending Saturday nights distilling deadly-dull applications and legal briefs into manageable summaries, checking and double-checking every organizational and factual and personal detail to make sure the cause wasn't jeopardized by a slip-up. It meant being constantly on call and on guard, and living as virtuously as a monk—knowing that many eyes were on the lookout for any hint of scandal that could bring down the opposition. It also meant managing people's anxieties and misguided brainstorming and freak-outs, pacifying those seeking assurance, and sometimes having to be the bad guy who pushed erratic or toxic members to the fringes of the fight. Yes, there were internal wars, even bitter rivalries within the ranks. But another part of the job was to keep uppermost in people's minds that the real enemy was never our neighbors, even when we disagreed.

It meant constantly adapting to new twists, keeping a seemingly never-ending issue fresh, finding new angles. Life under the threat of SLC was a surreal continuum of writing, speaking, presenting, designing, fundraising, leafletting, convincing, cajoling, arguing, watchdogging, and barely ever leaving the 30-mile circle of towns around Hudson for years on end—because whenever you did, you'd wind up getting called back to handle some emergency.

The upside was not just the hope of securing the region's safety and future; as a result of SLC's greed, we all met more of our neighbors (and got more of an education) in seven years than we otherwise could have

in seventy.

Even today, nearing the fifth anniversary of our victory, I still get stopped in the grocery store by a stranger who wants to thank me "for all that work you did." My standard replies are "Well, I had a lot of help," and "If I hadn't stepped up to the plate, I trust that someone else would have." Both of those replies I mean sincerely. I also know that stopping the plant was never a sure thing. On the contrary: There were thousands of ways to fail, and only a handful of ways to prevail. To win against the odds (with \$60 million and the political establishment lined up against us like a firing squad) required every ounce of an entire community's brain- and willpower. My role was to gather, harness, and focus that immense collective energy.

So I've jotted down these sketches of the people who came along for the ride on our bandwagon—naming just a few of the countless spokes of a vast wheel—in the hope that whenever the next disastrously foolish idea comes along, as it surely will, someone may read this and realize it can be done: by extraordinary ordinary people like us, and you.

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ON THE WATERFRONT, AGAIN

The victory we all won back in 2005 went far beyond stopping the plant. Secretary of State Randy Daniels' ruling also gave specific recommendations for the "immediate" rezoning of Hudson's waterfront. Recognizing that greener, more sustainable uses would generate more economic benefits than heavy industry, and that the two could not successfully coexist, Daniels stated clearly that the waterfront should be designed for public access to the river, recreation, ecological rebirth, and appropriate economic development. Yet, astonishingly, Hudson politicians have disregarded both the Secretary's instructions, and the outpouring of public support for that vision. Almost exactly five years later, the City has issued a draft Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan which would permanently ensconce heavy industrial activity there.

The plan should be a vision for the next fifty years, not one driven by short-term demands. Yet this LWRP would permit the extension of the Holcim dock by 400 feet, to accommodate massive barges used to ship hundreds of thousands of tons of gravel. Worse, it would permit a heavy haul road through the wetlands of the historic South Bay, with trucks whizzing through every 4–5 minutes, all day long.

In response to a plan that already deals a far better hand to private industry than public good, Holcim and its truck subcontractor O&G reveal their intentions by asserting that their activities take precedence over all other uses, which must "work around" them. They go on to state that they are resisting any oversight, including provisions preventing heavy industrial activity on nights or weekends and restricting the "height size, or numbers" of gravel, salt or other stockpiles". The companies claim the right to "dominate" the area, restricted only by "market conditions", not subject to any "City-imposed operational restrictions", including zoning permits.

Further: They "categorically reject" any attempt by the City to take control of the port, either by devising a harbor management plan, or appointing a harbormaster. They threaten that "any public recreation use/access would not be possible without our cooperation." They are opposed to a 100-foot easement along the railroad tracks, without which it would not be possible for pedestrians, bicycles and cars to access the southern reaches of the waterfront.

Finally, the companies explicitly divulge their long-term goal of running a conveyor belt through South Bay, which was just as explicitly ruled out by the Secretary of State in 2005.

Holcim and O&G admit the conflict between their interests and the public interest, a conflict which was the precise basis of the State's decision to deny the company a permit to build a new plant. But the public good does not seem to be on the agenda of either of these exemplars of private industry.

Like Holcim, whose track record has included millions of dollars in fines for price-fixing and pollution violations, O&G was embroiled in the 2004 scandal involving former Connecticut Governor John Rowland, who resigned and was jailed for accepting personal favors from contractors doing business with the State. More recently, the company has been sued for negligence, by the families of five workers killed, when a power plant it was constructing exploded in Middletown NY.

By caving into company pressure, the LWRP, as written, not only prevents the possibility of enjoyment of the waterfront by the people of Columbia County, it exposes future generations to the possible anxiety and expense of another war with another major industrial polluter. Which could be another Holcim cement plant, or something equally egregious, like a landfill for New York City garbage. The official LWRP public comment period ended March 15th; the State is not obliged to listen after that date. However, in all likelihood they *will* listen, and all comments still have a political effect, whether or not they are included in the public record. Residents of the entire region—not just Hudson—are encouraged to keep the heat on Albany and Hudson, until the waterfront is free of heavy industry, and a visionary plan is made.

Visit www.hudsonwaterfront.org to take action. —*Sam Pratt*