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Diane Wilson, magnificent unreasonableness

by Molly Ivins

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AUSTIN, Texas — I am writing about the most extraordinary book by the most extraordinary woman, and I would have interviewed her at length, except she's going to be arrested if she ever sets foot back in our home state.

That's pretty much the way life goes these days for Diane Wilson, who used to be just a regular old shrimper and mother of five kids, until she accidentally became an activist. Then, all hell broke loose. The results are described in *An Unreasonable Woman: A True Story of Shrimpers, Politicos, Polluters and the Fight for Seadrift, Texas*.

I believe the book will become a classic, not just of the environmental movement, but of American lit, as well. It is the rare, clear, moving voice of a working-class woman goaded into action against the greatest massed forces in the world today: globalized corporate greed backed by government power.

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Going up against all that can make you feel slightly outmanned and outgunned. But Diane Wilson has discovered a weapon I believe is the greatest strength of many women: pure, cussed stubbornness. She is an unreasonable woman. God bless her. Unreasonable women may yet save the world.

In 1989, the shrimping in Lavaca Bay was so poor, Wilson, a fifth-generation shrimper, was running a fish house. Lavaca Bay is home to one of the nation's largest underwater mercury superfund sites, a toxic pile left by Alcoa. But Wilson's descriptions of the beauty of that poor, broken bay just rip at your heart.

One day, a shrimper with three different kinds of cancer brought Wilson a small clipping from The Associated Press saying that Calhoun County was No. 1 in the nation for toxic waste disposal. Wilson had lived in Seadrift all her life and never heard anything about it—never read it in the paper, never heard it on TV.

So, she called a meeting of shrimpers about pollution—a distinctly unsuccessful meeting—and the entire local establishment came unglued. They were furious that anyone would question the chemical plants, the county's largest employer. They kept coming after Diane Wilson, so she kept going after them.

Specifically, Wilson took on Formosa Plastics, a Taiwanese chemical company then building an enormous PVC (polyvinyl chloride) facility near Seadrift. Polyvinyl chloride can cause liver, stomach and brain cancer. Formosa Plastics insisted the plant was “the jewel of the Texas Gulf Coast,” and would put out

“zero toxic emissions” into the community. The economic development crowd was overjoyed, and Texas government at all levels scrambled to offer tax abatements to this lovely new enterprise.

Of course, Wilson and her watchdogs found shoddy construction from the beginning, the Environmental Protection Agency later found massively contaminated groundwater under the plant, Formosa was repeatedly fined for water quality violations, Occupational Safety and Health Administration violations, same old, same old.

One of the saddest parts of this saga is the eventual split between Wilson and Jim Blackburn, a Houston environmental lawyer, steadfast fighter and Wilson's partner in the struggle for a long time. Blackburn wound up negotiating separately with Formosa Plastics and signing a deal he thought would protect the community. Wilson balked at it, and dramatically went out on her boat the night before the ceremony and tried to kill herself with pills and wine. Didn't work, she just felt horrible, and the deal went ahead.

Blackburn may well have acted from the best motives, and perhaps Wilson opposed him at the end because she was not as knowledgeable or sophisticated as he. On the other hand, on Oct. 6 of this year, there was an explosion at the Formosa plant at Seadrift, the entire town was terrified, and 11 workers were hospitalized.

Diane Wilson is no longer just a citizen who wandered into a local fight. By now, she has become an international activist and is working hard to get justice for survivors of the 1984 horror at Bhopal, India, where 500,000 people were poisoned by a Union Carbide pesticide plant. At least 20,000 died.

Warren Anderson, then-CEO of Union Carbide, initially promised to stand trial in India. But the case was settled with what most observers felt was unseemly haste, and Anderson decided prudence should keep him out of India.

India tried to extradite him, but the FBI kept saying it just couldn't find the man. He was cleverly concealed in South Hampton on Long Island. Union Carbide has since been bought by Dow Chemical, and Wilson was arrested for demonstrating in front of the Dow plant in Seadrift—charged with criminal trespass and sentenced to four months in jail.

She figures, why should she go back to face the music when Anderson is still dodging extradition? And besides, Texas is unlikely to send the Rangers after her for criminal trespass. She is currently on book tour in California.

In reviewing her book, there is serious danger of condescension—gee, how did a mere mom and Texas shrimper come to write such a marvelous book? How did a woman who sometimes can't keep her subjects and verbs in agreement (the president of the United States has the same problem) become such a wonderful writer? I know one editor who spotted her style in a letter in the 1980s and urged her to write then, so I suspect she's just a natural. What a gift. What a story. What magnificent unreasonableness.

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