

[WILD LENS]

HELLBENT

A Right of Nature Story



Photo: Hellbender in Eastern Pennsylvania by Justin Grubb

Short Synopsis:

In a small rural town in Pennsylvania, the refuge of a rare salamander and the only source of clean drinking water for 700 people is threatened by the installation of a fracking waste injection well, prompting community members to band together to fight for the rights of their people and nature.

Details:

Hellbent tells the story of one town's epic fight to prevent a fracking waste injection well from being built in their community. In 2013, a mother and daughter living in Grant Township, Pennsylvania, heard that a fracking company wanted to build a wastewater injection well near the Little Mahoning Creek, their town's only source of fresh water and one of the last refuges of the endangered eastern hellbender salamander. These women, known as Judy and Stacey Wanchisn, rallied their community against the project out of fear of the threats it posed to the Little Mahoning. "I remember some of the statistics and it was scary," recalls Judy. Fracking wastewater injection wells are loaded with harmful chemicals and radioactive substances and they are prone to leaks and even explosions. For Judy and Stacey, the risk of wastewater from the inject well getting into their local watershed was too great to ignore. "If our water systems are permanently contaminated or screwed up in any way, then there are going to be 700 people without water," said Stacey.

"The more you read the more you got scared and I just said no. As long as I can live and breathe I will fight this thing," said Judy.

Through community organizing, Judy and Stacey helped pass an ordinance in their town that prohibits the dumping of fracking waste in June of 2014. Less than two months later, Pennsylvania General Energy, the fracking company seeking to dump their waste in Grant Township, sued Grant Township in federal court, claiming that the town was infringing on the company's constitutional right to build a wastewater injection well within the town. Grant Township sought the help of the EPA but was ignored.

Then in 2015, the people of Grant Township voted to enact a Home Rule Charter that not only banned the depositing of frack-waste but also granted legal rights to the Little Mahoning Watershed. After partnering with the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF), the people of Grant Township then intervened in the lawsuit against them and argued on behalf of the Little Mahoning Watershed. "We feel that we should be able to speak for the hellbender salamander, plant, water, whatever," said Judy. "We need to give a voice to the voiceless,"

Then, in March 2020, their fierce resistance successfully compelled the first-ever enforcement of a local Rights of Nature law, when the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection revoked Pennsylvania General Energy's permit to dump its waste in Grant Township citing their home rule charter that bans such activity and asserts the rights of local ecosystems.

The legal victory is a win not just for the people of Grant Township, but also for the eastern hellbender salamander, and other communities fighting to protect their natural resources from the fossil fuel industry. The victory is also a win for the Rights for Nature movement, which has been spreading across the globe in recent years. Over the last decade, courts, legislatures, and various bodies of government in several countries have won ecosystem protection cases by granting rights to nature. In 2008, Ecuador became the first country in the world to formally recognize and implement the Rights of Nature and in 2017, New Zealand granted its Whanganui River legal personhood rights.

With many communities feeling alone and helpless in their fight to protect the ecosystems they rely on from exploitation, Grant Township serves as proof that even a small group of regular people can protect natural resources from large-scale threats.

Images: [\[Credit: Justin Grubb\]](#)

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