

Introduction

Greenfield Slam-Dunks Wal-Mart

"At the end of the day, the only vote that really matters is the consumers'."

– David Glass, CEO of Wal-Mart Stores

Wal-Mart means nothing to me.

Home Depot and Target mean even less.

So why have I spent the last six years of my life chasing around the country trying to convince people that companies like Wal-Mart and Home Depot are bad neighbors?

Maybe it's because of what happened in my hometown of Greenfield, Massachusetts.

If there is anything remotely close to a normal day in Greenfield, Massachusetts, then October 19, 1993 was normal:

The police received a call reporting a manhole was out of place at the corner of Pleasant and Chapman Streets.

The Solid Waste Management District held a special composting workshop at the Elks Club on Federal Street.

Wilson's Department Store, the 108 year old downtown anchor business, offered free coffee and donut holes during its Harvest Sale.

And two American flags were stolen from a yard on Grinnell Street.

I had lived through sixteen years of such days in Greenfield. But this day in Greenfield was not yet over.

Over the span of twelve hours on this cool, overcast day in October, 5,708 people in this community that describes itself as a

"classic American town" and "everybody's home town", went to the polls and voted to reject a Wal-Mart store on the edge of town. The vote was a close call – but we knew it would be.

Our little community of 19,000 people had brought down the Goliath of discounting. By the next morning, people from Berkeley to Bangladesh knew about the town that had slain the world's largest retailer.

* * *

There were actually two questions on the town ballot. The first question called for the rezoning of 63 acres of industrial land to commercial, so that Wal-Mart could build a 123,000 square foot store right next to two major highways.

The second question would allow buildings larger than 40,000 square feet in the general commercial district. Both questions were on the ballot because an anti-Wal-Mart group called Citizens for Responsible Development (CRD) had gone out and collected more than 600 signatures from registered voters, as called for in Greenfield's initiative petition bylaws.

A public referendum was considered a last-ditch effort to stop Wal-Mart's bulldozers. The previous May, in a non-binding vote, townspeople had voted two to one in favor of rezoning the Wal-Mart property. Two months later, our twenty-seven member Town Council had also voted two to one to rezone. The Citizens for Responsible Development set up tables on the Town Common and collected signatures in the rain. It was an act of desperation – and the mood in town grew hostile. "Who are these people that are responsible for these petitions?" grumbled one Town Councilor. "I want to know who these people are!"

The CRD, in fact, was headed by the owner of one of the largest industrial businesses in town, David Bete. Bete was convinced that rezoning valuable industrial land was a shortsighted mistake that would cost the town financially. Bete's company made fog nozzles. He had nothing to lose financially if Wal-Mart came to Greenfield. Bete wrote a letter to the editor explaining his views:

Wal-Mart has identified the only sizable piece of land in Greenfield suitable for development. The reasons it is suitable for retail are similar to the reasons it is suitable for industry: good highway access and visibility, access to utilities that Greenfield paid for to service industrial growth, and a size of more than 50 acres . . . The executives at Wal-Mart must be laughing in glee over the gullible country bumpkins of Greenfield who will turn over one-third of their best industrial land to them for a few hundred thousand dollars so Wal-Mart can annihilate existing business in Greenfield and send the profits to Arkansas.

Bete's efforts helped reach the petition goal, and the referendum was filed in Town Hall. The petition gave the Town Council one last opportunity to rescind its vote in favor of rezoning for Wal-Mart – but everyone knew the Council would never reconsider. Instead, they scheduled a special town election for October.

The Citizens for Responsible Development had an eight-week campaign on their hands – and they needed someone to manage it. One of the Town Councilors, Wendy Sibbison, called me up and asked me if I would be interested in such a campaign, because I had worked on political campaigns from county Sheriff to State Senator. "What's the big deal about Wal-Mart?" I asked. "It's just a store." Today, whenever I think about why most shoppers don't seem to care about Wal-Mart coming to town, I remember that I was exactly in that frame of mind in August of 1993. I couldn't have cared less.

But as I began talking about the project, I realized that a) it would be time-limited and b) it had great campaign potential: Giant corporation pushes around small town. In fact, I saw the proportions of a national story in the making, because I had heard about Wal-Mart's efforts to bust down the door in neighboring Vermont. I had never set foot inside a Wal-Mart, but the corporate bully aspect really appealed to me. I told Wendy I would do it – as long as she promised me it would all be over in eight to ten weeks. Six years and 29 states later, I am still on the campaign trail against Wal-Mart.

Two days after I agreed to submit a proposal to run the anti-Wal-Mart effort, I was interviewed for the job in the corporate offices of Bete Fog Nozzle, David's business, before a committee of half a dozen citizens. I presented an outline for a two-month campaign that combined grass roots organizing, telemarketing to identify voters who were with us and major print and radio buys. I told the committee that someone else would have to be in charge of raising money, because I could not be designing ads and lining up lawn sign locations as well as fund-raising. David Bete agreed to raise the funds to carry out the plan. Our coordinating group would meet every other week in the upstairs conference room at Bete's. Did we have a shot? I didn't have time to even think about it.

I was hired by the beginning of August, and the first thing I suggested was that we take on a new name, one that was much more direct and to the point. "Let's be very clear about what we're doing here," I said. "Let's call ourselves WE'RE AGAINST THE WAL."

By election day, even those people who were in favor of Wal-Mart were calling it "The WAL". Our goal was to show people in town that there was another side of the WAL – an unattractive, hidden side of this giant conglomerate. That information, I thought, would turn townspeople away from the project.

Given the two previous landslide votes in favor of Wal-Mart, everyone thought we had no chance – including Wal-Mart. We caught them with their cash register down. Corporate money from Arkansas was slow to arrive.

* * *

I had no clue as to what was going on with the referendum vote until around ten o'clock the night of the election. We knew the wording for the two questions was confusing, so our red, white and blue lawn signs simply read: "STOP THE WAL: Vote No on Questions 1 and 2."

For eight weeks my wife, Anna, and I did nothing but eat, drink and sleep Wal-Mart. We were managing the tail-end of a year-long battle to keep Wal-Mart out. WE'RE AGAINST THE WAL had

raised about \$17,000 to pay for newspaper ads, telephone polling, radio spots. David Bete has promised that any money we couldn't raise, he would put up personally.

To do a little reconnaissance, I drove twenty-two miles to the nearest Wal-Mart in Hinsdale, New Hampshire. Inside I wandered through aisles of shoes from Brazil, skirts made in Sri Lanka, and plastic place mats from Korea. There were signs everywhere: MADE IN THE USA. I scribbled down a few prices of grocery items, like Fritos and Wheaties. (When I got back to Greenfield, I found lower prices on the food items.) On my way out I paid for a \$1.00 bag of popcorn and a soda. The clerk said I had to wait while they refilled syrup for the soda machine, so I cancelled the drink, and asked for my money back. The frazzled clerk told me I couldn't get my change back until the next customer cashed out, because her register locked after every transaction. I let her keep the change and bolted out. That was only purchase I have ever made at a Wal-Mart.

During the campaign, we built three portable four by six foot "WALs" of our own, that displayed letters from citizens opposed to superstores. These WALs were erected on Town Common every Saturday, and at a circuit of local grocery stores. We wrote to David Glass: "If you want to know why Greenfield doesn't want Wal-Mart here, come on up – the writing's on the WAL."

Wal-Mart eventually spent more than twice what we did, not counting what it cost them to hire a local lawyer to front for them. Every penny they spent came from corporate headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas. But they hurt their own cause by making some serious campaign mistakes including:

- Mailing out an anonymous flier to every household in town praising WalMart's virtues. The flier had a picture on Town Hall on the cover making it look like an official mailing from the town. Wal-Mart eventually admitted that it was their flier that had gone out unsigned.

- Forming a "front" citizen's group that had very few local citizens in it.

The feeling was pervasive that Wal-Mart was not playing by the rules. On the day after the election, one voter explained to the paper why he was against rezoning: "John Pretto of Chapman Street said he voted 'no' in part because of a flier Wal-Mart paid for that was unsigned. 'I think Wal-Mart is pretty underhanded,' he said."

During the last week of the campaign, Wal-Mart shipped up from Arkansas full page media ads. But their ads were canned, sloppy, unemotional appeals based on low everyday prices. They failed to address the major campaign issue that appeared on all our ads: "We're not gaining a store – we're losing our community."

Ours was an appeal to the heart, as well as the head: love of town, loss of local control, destruction of the unique character of the community. "There's one thing you can't find on any Wal-Mart shelf," I kept repeating, "and that's small town quality of life. But once you lose it, Wal-Mart can't sell it back to you at any price."

Wal-Mart was only able to relate to pocketbook issues. We were raising issues that they had never encountered before. They started defending themselves very late, perhaps believing that deep down, every voter was fundamentally a bargain shopper. By then, however, scores of letters to the editor had warned about Wal-Mart's economic impact on small towns, including letters from other communities that had been hurt:

To the Editor:

So, Wal-Mart has decided to bless your community with their big, big store and its low, low prices! They have taken it upon themselves to hire your unemployed, attract business from out of town to your community, and just generally impose their formula for making you a better place to live.

They told us that, too! Don't believe it! . . . If you disrupt your local economy with a big injection of Wal-Mart and take out some of the small businesses which have been at the heart of your community in the process, you may find that the true price of all those low, low prices is very high indeed!

Gregory S. Gundy, Rockland, Maine

To the Editor:

Bring Wal-Mart to Greenfield? No way. Not over our dead Main Street! If we vote to rezone scarce industrial land in Greenfield so Wal-Mart can come in and bulldoze existing businesses, we're crazy. So, I say, 'Hey, David Glass. If you think we need you folks from Arkansas to come in and show us how to solve our problems, then I want you to know, I don't think so. We can do it our own way.' Local people generating local jobs, not income for out-of-state fat cat corporations.

Don't back down. Back downtown!

Brian Summer, Greenfield

To the Editor:

People never seem to have enough. They always want more. I have lived here for forty years. I am 73 years old. I think Wal-Mart will only make the town worse, and I think a lot of the older people in town have been around long enough to see a decline in the town's character. Let's not make it worse."

Rose Anderer Miner, Greenfield

We filled up the editorial page of *The Recorder* newspaper with letters. Eventually Wal-Mart caught on and started generating letters of their own, but they were a day late and a dollar short. Their campaign people called me up one afternoon and said: "Al, knock it off with all those letters to the editor. People are getting turned off." I turned back to our Committee and urged people to redouble their letter-writing efforts, because we had obviously hit the other side in away that hurt.

Despite the visibility of our campaign, I had good reason to be worried. The final eight weeks leading up to the vote had been bitter and ugly. I had been called a Communist. A Judas. An elitist. Some of my "friends" in the neighborhood had written letters to the editor criticizing me personally. The campaign was rapidly descending into the gutter. Pro-Wal-Mart people began circulating a rumor that I was

being paid an enormous sum to run the campaign. They followed up with an ad criticizing our group for forcing the taxpayers to spend \$12,000 on this special election.

As a deal-sweetener, Wal-Mart offered to pay for road reconstruction near the site, and promised the town \$50,000 to help market its downtown. Wal-Mart opened up a candy store of incentives. On the surface, it looked alluring. But underneath there was the \$37 million Wal-Mart would pump out of our community, taking several dozen small businesses with it. We published a map showing that the Wal-Mart land parcel was bigger than our entire downtown. New England Yankees are not flamboyant: this building was simply out of scale.

Greenfield had insisted that Wal-Mart pay for an "independent" economic study that would quantify the retailer's impact on the town. Wal-Mart came up with \$35,000, and a firm from New Hampshire was hired. We found out later that this firm had already done direct contract work for Wal-Mart. But even this study, which understated the negative side of the WAL, gave us enough ammunition to sink a dozen Wal-Marts.

When Wal-Mart first showed up in town in October of 1992, they boasted that they would create 270 new jobs and \$90,000 annually in added property tax revenue. Local officials jumped in the tank immediately! Jobs and property taxes every elected official's dream. But when the economic impact statement was released in July of 1993, the gild was off the lily: under the "high impact" scenario, only 29 new jobs would be created, and less than \$30,000 in property taxes. By not counting jobs it would kill at other businesses, Wal-Mart had inflated its job claims ten times over. The revenue gain was negligible: it amounted to \$1.58 in savings per resident per year. One of my neighbors said: "I'd pay Wal-Mart \$1.58 a year just to keep their traffic and congestion out of our town!"

Only a handful of citizens in town ever read the Wal-Mart economic impact report. It was 80 pages long and filled with charts and graphs in 10 point type. It became our job to translate this dry report into facts people could understand:

- By the fifth year after Wal-Mart was built, they would control 80% of the town's department store sales.
- Existing Greenfield stores would lose \$34.8 million in sales transferred to Wal-Mart.
- More than \$60,000 in property taxes would be lost from reduction in property value caused by sales transfers from existing stores.

Even loaded with all this data against the development and despite all the political blunders Wal-Mart had made, I still had good reason to be nervous about the vote.

After all, no one had ever beaten Wal-Mart at the polls.

* * *

The polls in nine precincts had closed at 8 pm, but there was no visible activity in the Town Clerk's front office until well into the evening. Several staff were huddled in the back room. That meant it was a close vote. They were probably doing a recount. I felt we were going to lose.

All that afternoon I sat by the voting registrars in Precinct 7 with my ruler and red pencil, lining through the names of voters that we had identified as antiWal-Mart. Too many of our people had not turned out to vote. One reporter described the scene at the ballot box:

Inside, a steady stream of voters flowed in. A cross-section of Greenfield, they wore suits and ties, T-shirts and jeans, a Boy Scout leader uniform, a Friendly's Restaurant uniform, a baseball jacket, a dress and high heels, a blue blazer and loafers.

At 5:00 P.M. our volunteers drove around to each precinct and collected all our poll-watchers' lists. We hurried them back to Bete Fog Nozzle. Inside, we had half a dozen people ready to call everyone whom our poll-watching indicated had not yet turned out to vote. There were at least 400 names on the dogeared sheets.

We gathered our callers in the narrow hallway. "Wendy," I yelled, "you and Steve take these Precinct 2's and give David the rest of Precinct 3. If people say they're eating dinner, tell them to get up from the table and get down to vote. Remember: the polls close at eight!"

We filled up six phone lines for the next three hours. One of my friends asked me: "How's it look?"

"Our polling says we're strong in Precincts 2, 4, 5 and 6," I replied. "But I was over in Precinct 7 most of the day, and it felt like we were getting clobbered. It's just a feeling, but everyone who came in looked like they had just come from Wal-Mart."

* * *

As we paced up and down the dim corridor in Town Hall, we could hear the voices of the Clerk's staff. The phone rang inside the office several times. I knew that Town Clerk Maureen Winseck was calling her brother, who was a selectman in town and very pro-Wal-Mart.

"Don't ask for a recount," she shushed him over the phone (I found out later). "We counted it two times by hand."

Standing next to me at the entrance to the Clerk's office was the editorial page editor of our local newspaper. He wouldn't say a word to me, or even look at me. He had editorialized in favor of Wal-Mart at every opportunity. His dislike for me and the "antis" was like a dark air hanging on the first floor of Town Hall. I didn't understand why he wanted Wal-Mart in town. His newspaper stood to lose substantial ad revenues when local businesses shut down.

We had already taken down our tallies off the "tear sheets" from the automatic voting machines. The pale blue numbers on those enormous sheets showed us virtually in a dead heat. "It must be the absentee ballots," I thought. "The absentee ballots are going to kill us." Those ballots were from people who had left town early before the election or voters in nursing homes. Would they end up being the margin of difference?

Two young reporters wandered vacantly up and down the hallway. A TV crew from Springfield went down to our headquarters at the Knapp Sack deli on Main Street. The vote was coming in too late to put on the 11 o'clock news.

Finally, around 10 o'clock, Maureen came into the front office. She didn't seem pleased with the numbers in her hands.

"OK, she began, "here are the numbers:

Question 1: 2,845 Yes, 2,854 No.

Question 2: 2,811 Yes, 2,897 No."

* * *

I stumbled out past the pale editorial page editor without a glance, and pushed through the double doors of Town Hall and out into the street. I let out a loud HOO-WHEEE! several times, which echoed across the Town Common, bounced off the empty buildings on Bank Row, and leapt back towards me off the walls of Town Hall.

This was a 60% voter turnout! It was the largest turnout in recent history, double the turnout for most local elections, and higher than the 1992 Presidential election. We had taken both measures – by narrow votes to be sure. But this was not a game of retail horse-shoes. It was winner take all.

We had slam-dunked Wal-Mart!

* * *

Over at the Knapp Sack, a crowd of WE'RE AGAINST THE WAL supporters paced around the empty delicatessen, grabbing nervously at potato chips and ginger ale. They were tuned into local radio station WHAI to get the latest count. A large red, white and blue cake with the words VOTE NO ON QUESTIONS ONE AND TWO decorated the empty window. A few limp balloons hung from the ceiling.

I ran into the room holding the Town Clerk's numbers in my hand. I don't remember what I told the group, but here is how the newspapers described it the next morning:

The Recorder

While Wal-Mart may be the nation's leading retailer, it will not be Greenfield's leading retailer.

"We're two for two, we got 'em!" WE'RE AGAINST THE WAL campaign manager Albert Norman exclaimed Tuesday night about 10 as he ran in the door of his group's Main Street headquarters in the former Knapp Sack deli.

XXVIII SLAM-DUNKING WAL-MART

Norman hugged group chairman David Bete Sr. and the gathering of about 35 cheered the narrow defeat of Wal-Mart for almost a minute.

"Somewhere in Bentonville (Ark.) there's a family a little less rich, because they are not going to be taking our money," Norman said.

The Springfield Union-News

Goodbye, Wal-Mart!

That was the message an extremely slim majority of voters sent from behind election curtains yesterday, a difference of nine – count them – nine votes.

"I declare Greenfield a Wal-Mart-free zone," said Albert Norman, an organizer for We're Against the WAL, while munching on a piece of cake with "Vote NO on Questions One and Two" frosted on it. Norman could barely contain his excitement. Around him about 40 anti-Wal-Mart campaigners mingled, hugging one another and exclaiming joy over the narrow victory.

When asked what he thought Greenfield will look like in the next five years, Norman grinned. "Beautiful, green and Wal-Mart free," Norman said.

* * *

By the time I reached home, it was well past midnight. I let the cats out, emptied out my pockets on the kitchen counter: all the phone numbers and street addresses, paper clips and precinct tally sheets.

And one other thing.

I had been carrying around with me all day a symbol of defeat, just in case. The symbol of the next phase of our fight against mega-stores.

I had prepared myself for defeat by printing up the following bumper sticker:

IF THEY BUILD IT
WE WON'T COME!

There was no speech that went along with it, I would just adlib something about this being the official beginning of a boycott of the Greenfield Wal-Mart.

I took the folded bumper sticker from my pocket, which was now crumpled and full of notes on the back. I threw it in the fireplace. Some other community might need to start a boycott, but not us, not now.

"At the end of the day," David Glass would later tell *Fortune Magazine*, "the only vote that really matters is the consumers'."

Tonight, at the end of this long day, the voters had rejected Wal-Mart! I was probably as surprised as Wal-Mart that we had won. I didn't think we could pull it off. But we did.

The following morning was like a retail obituary for the folks in Bentonville. "Wal-Mart is, of course, very disappointed," the company's local attorney was quoted as saying. The October 21 edition of the *New York Times* carried this typically terse and bitter comment from Jane Arend, a Wal-Mart spokeswoman: "That was the only site we were interested in in Greenfield. There are thousands of other communities in the Northeast where we can continue our expansion."

Continue to expand they did – but with a band of Sprawl-Busters following right behind.