Guardian of Grand Bois
Clarice Friloux – homemaker, arm wrestler, sludge fighter

By Janisse Ray

South of New Orleans, in the black-marsh country of the Louisiana delta, lies a town called Grand Bois, too small for most maps. About 250 people, mainly of Native American and Cajun descent, live in modest aluminum-sided houses along State Route 24, which connects Bourg, 3 miles west, to Larose, 13 miles east. The town straddles two parishes, Lafourche and Terrebonne, where churches have names like Our Lady of Prompt Succor, and Mardi Gras parades are staggered so parishioners can attend more of them. Murky bayous teem with alligators, catfish, and crawfish, and the immense live oak trees, cloaked thickly with Spanish moss, are a sight to see.

Grand Bois, anyone will tell you, has no crime. Occasionally a wildlife officer will cite one of the kids for going over his limit duck-hunting. Yet an immense crime has taken place here.

One day in March 1994, eight tractor-trailers loaded with hazardous waste streamed into town. They were headed for a treatment facility on land leased to Campbell Wells Corporation (now U.S. Liquids), which consisted of 16 open pits dug to process toxic sludge from oil fields. They were the first of an army of trucks that came and went, while contract employees stirred the sludge back and forth with gigantic egg beaters until it evaporated or leached into the ground. Employees called what they did to the waste "working it over."

Seven years later, I meet Clarice Friloux for breakfast in Houma, Louisiana, a nearby town large enough to have a motel. Clarice, 35, was born in Grand Bois. Shy and quiet, she spent most of her time keeping house for her husband, Danny, a ship repairman, and their two children-until the day those tractor-trailers came to town and changed her life forever. Since then she has been fighting for her community. She walks into the restaurant looking just as I imagined-purposeful, eager, hopeful. She is not a tall woman, but looks very strong; she wears simple walking boots with blue jeans and a brown V-necked sweater.

How was the motel? she wants to know. Did I find my way from New Orleans without getting lost? Did I sleep well? She is warm and gracious, not what I'd expect from someone I've heard is a tri-state arm-wrestling champion. Danny, now on disability income because of lower-back deterioration, accompanies Clarice. He speaks in a thick Cajun accent, and despite his pain, smiles as readily as does she.

I ask him if everybody in Grand Bois has an accent like his, and he ducks his head, "I don't know nobody in Grand Bois got an accent," he says with a grin. "But I do have a problem with people understanding me."

Clarice tells me what happened to her community. "Everybody got sick after '94," she says. When the convoy descended on Grand Bois, so did a chartful of health problems. "It was like an invasion," Clarice recalls. At the facility, men in "moonsuits" scurried around, dumping truckloads of sludge, until a stench that seemed a combination of diesel, mildew, and rotten egg permeated the tiny town. "The smell was piercing, like it would tear the insides of your nose out," Clarice says. "The children got off the school bus with their shirts over their faces."
Clarice's brother, R. J. Molinere, was driving his family to a boxing match in Larose one afternoon during the March dumping. As they passed the facility his children threatened to vomit, and he hurriedly pulled off the road, only to be accosted by vapors that took their breath away and left their eyes swollen and teary. That night, he laid towels across door-cracks to keep out the fumes, and made rounds in his dark house, putting his ear to the children's mouths to make sure they were still breathing.

For ten days 81 trucks bearing waste laced with substances like benzene, toluene, hydrogen sulfide, and arsenic roared into Grand Bois. They came from an Exxon petroleum-treatment plant in Alabama.

"That spring was mild," Clarice says, "and there was no wind blowing in. So the stink wasn't coming from somewhere else. We could smell the chemicals on our clothes. The school bus was turning around right in front of the facility, so we were gassing our children." Because the facility was on the St. Louis Canal, a bayou dug decades ago to haul cypress out to the Intracoastal Waterway, wastes arrived by barge as well as by truck. "They could come in the middle of the night and just poison us," Clarice says. Frightened neighbors began to discuss what might be done. Clarice called her parish council member, who advised her to start a petition. For 17 straight days she and others stood by the highway, waving a hand-lettered placard asking passersby to sign the petition to shut down the facility. Finally they had 5,000 signatures. These in hand, Clarice appeared at the parish council meetings, first in Lafourche and then in Terrebonne.

"Before that, we had no idea who was the parish president, who was senator, who was governor," Clarice says. And why should she, since she is Houma Indian, a people without a history of respect from the government? Clarice's great-grandfather had raised cattle south of Grand Bois, until the hurricane of 1915 destroyed everything he had and he migrated north. His children, who were full-blooded Native American although they bore the French surname given to the family by early settlers, grew up in Grand Bois.

"I was this little Indian girl," she says. "We weren't even allowed to attend school in Bourg. They shipped us to the next parish over to go to school." Her childhood was spent swimming in the bayous, fishing for catfish, feeding the chickens, and riding horses. Danny was a local, too. "Half of the community is his family, the other half is mine," Clarice says.

Determined to protect her relations, Clarice formed a committee that consisted of her closest supporters, including her husband, brother R. J., his wife, and any others eager to work. The council members to whom she had appealed said that they couldn't close the facility, but one of them contacted an attorney.

Enter Gladstone Jones III, a Mississippi-born lawyer who stands almost seven feet tall, son and stepson of attorneys. Barely two years out of Tulane's law school and three months into his own practice, Jones was eager for a challenge. By April, he would set up shop on a picnic table in Clarice's yard while the community gathered around him.

"It didn't take much investigation to find the Exxon loads were full of hydrogen sulfide and benzene at high levels of toxicity," Jones says. The benzene was at levels 150 times those allowable by occupational law. "We decided to bring suit against Campbell Wells, the operator in control, and Exxon, who had dumped that particular waste, on the grounds of exposure as a result of negligence." The community couldn't afford Jones, nor the legal acrobatics necessary to shut down the facility, but within days a wealthy Houston attorney who heard about the case on the news rang Jones's telephone and offered to be his backer.

What Clarice refers to as "the Cause" quickly gave her an education in the seamy side of politics. She learned that any other state in the Union would have required the facility to label the wastes as hazardous and handle them accordingly. Not Louisiana. In 1980 the U.S. Congress granted oversight to the states to determine how they regulated hazardous wastes. By 1981 Louisiana, where some have suggested the Texaco star be placed atop the capitol, passed a law allowing wastes generated by the oil and gas industries to be classified as non hazardous, although specific components, such as benzene, toluene, and heavy metals like lead and arsenic, are known health hazards. "The minute it crosses the state line it's not a hazardous material," says Clarice.

Meanwhile, convoys continued to arrive and unload their sludge. Residents began to frequent doctors with upper respiratory ailments, headaches, nosebleeds, blurred vision, and nausea. One man, Lyes Verdin, lived near the facility with his wife and three-year-old daughter, who developed leg welts, involuntary blinking, severe diarrhea, and then asthma. Verdin sent his family to live with relatives in a nearby town.

The next six years would involve meeting after meeting, candlelight vigils, pickets, and innumerable trips to Baton Rouge, two hours away, where the community demonstrated at the capitol and in front of the governor's mansion. Clarice was asked to join the board of the Louisiana Environmental Action Network. She was called on to testify in legislative hearings. In fact, those six years would involve more speeches than Clarice cares to remember.

Twice, state senator Mike Robichaux introduced bills that would have required a 2,000-foot-wide buffer between the facility now owned by U.S. Liquids and the community. A physician, he examined Verdin's child. "There's no question that she will suffer lifelong consequences," he says. "It was unbelievable what these people went through."

Each of his bills failed. "In the legislature, everything Dr. Mike tried to do for us was shot down," Clarice says. "Anybody who helped him, their bills were shot down."

The community begged for an official study. Finally in 1997 toxicologist Patricia Williams of the Louisiana State University Toxicology Outreach Program received funds to study the health of the now high-profile Grand Bois. For an entire year Williams collected blood and urine samples, first from women and children, then from men. What she found was sobering. Three out of four residents showed evidence of having stippled cells, damaged red blood cells in the body known to be caused only three ways-two of them genetic diseases not associated with the Cajun or Native American populations. The third cause of stippled cells is heavy-metal poisoning. Clarice's blood showed up with stippled cells.

Heavy-metal poisoning, while treatable, can cause hearing loss, kidney damage, miscarriage, and mental retardation in offspring. Symptoms of exposure to arsenic and lead include nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, and blood-tinged diarrhea; chronic exposure results in more serious illness. Other studies, also funded by the state, found no evidence that the water, air, and soil around Grand Bois were contaminated enough to pose a threat. The community did not believe these studies. To attract attention, its members gathered to paint gruesome signs: "Warning: Airborne Chemicals Ahead," one of them read, and "If You Can Read This Sign, You Are Being Exposed to Toxic Chemicals." And another: "Send us your toxins/Your heavy metals and sludge/We'll mix it with dirt/And call it Cajun fudge." At first the only way anyone could contact Clarice was by her home telephone. After it began to ring constantly-Glad, as she calls the attorney, needed her for this or that-Clarice saw her private, quiet life in the sleepy little town slipping away. Some days she would try to escape, often to visit her grandmother, who had no telephone. She wouldn't be there long before a neighbor's car would pull up: Glad wants you to call him, the neighbor would say. It's important. Some days Clarice's caller-identification listed the maximum 74 calls, where it stopped counting.

I want to know how Clarice kept going, how she kept her family together. "Meetings were held at our house," she says. "On pickets, our kids were with us. Our kids lived this." Part of her determination came from the knowledge that she was fighting for others, too. One day on talk radio (the other guest was a representative of U.S. Liquids) Clarice was accused of acting singly. "I may be alone here today," she replied, "but I know I have the support of my family, my friends, my community."

Robichaux, who is married to the Houma Indian tribal leader, explains Clarice's role in a historical context. "The Houma is a matriarchal tribe," he says. "Clarice is a natural leader. It's part of her bloodline. Both instinctively and by consent Clarice represents what's in the minds and lives of the people in her community. She's their mouthpiece." Then he offers an even wider view. "In the plight of Native Americans-five hundred years of tears-this is not even a chapter," he says. "It's a couple of pages in the history of abuse."

Clarice, Danny, and I have been sitting at the breakfast table in the winter sunshine for hours. I want to see Grand Bois, and the facility. Driving out of Houma, we pass Marie, Clarice's mother, at the farmers' market, selling oranges straight off her son's trees. In the fight to stop the facility, Marie has done her part, attending meetings, marching, or babysitting; often for gatherings she cooked up huge batches of gumbo, shrimp spaghetti, and jambalaya. By evening, she runs Marie's Bar, one of the few business establishments in Grand Bois, where she has kept things in line for the past 25 years. "You come back on a Friday and we'll take you dancing zydeco," she says. I buy five pounds of fruit.

Grand Bois is more nondescript than I thought. It is not even a town, really. It doesn't have a post office or a grocery store or a school. It has a church and a bar, a welding shop, and a small ironworks that manufactures bits for oil drilling. Clarice guides me through the streets, and then beyond: She shows me bayous and marshes, killdeer and great egrets, shrimp boats and local seafood restaurants whose walls are covered with photos of phenomenal fishermen.

The highway bisects the waste disposal site. Lines of trees and pampas grass hide the operation from the road, and except for the stench and the high chain-link fence, crushed in places by dead trees, a traveler would never suspect what hazards lie within. The lawsuit was a lengthy and costly affair (an estimated $1.8 million) that involved a six-week court trial in 1998 and an appeal resolved in 2000. Clarice's deposition at the trial took 16 hours. At the last minute, the evidence of Patricia Williams was ruled "incomplete," and also that of a Colorado toxicologist who had examined eight of the plaintiffs and found they had all been exposed to toxic chemicals. Dr. James Kornberg, an occupational medicine specialist, testified that the Grand Bois residents stand an increased chance of contracting cancer.

During the fifth week, U.S. Liquids, which now owns the waste site, offered to settle out of court. That night, Clarice paced the floor. About two in the morning, she called Robichaux, whom she trusted implicitly, and asked his advice. "Take the settlement," he said. U.S. Liquids agreed to expand the buffer along its western boundary, toward Grand Bois, and build a 20-foot-high soil berm, a levee against flood and hurricane spillage. Four pits closest to town would be closed, cleaned and filled with dirt. Lyes Verdin, who lived 300 feet away, would be awarded an undisclosed settlement. The house he had lived in, found to be contaminated with barium, would be destroyed. The community agreed to take down its signs.

Meanwhile, the trial continued, focused on Exxon. One week later the Louisiana jury decided that only 4 of the 11 plaintiffs could solidly link their suffering to the facility, and awarded them a total of $35,000. The plaintiffs appealed and forced Exxon to pay an additional undisclosed amount in 2000.

Today, all 16 pits are still open, Clarice says, and the berm has not been constructed, although the majority of the waste is now going to other facilities. "Ours was not a terribly apparent victory," says Robichaux. "But things are a lot better off." Attorney Jones echoes those thoughts: "None of the oil companies want to send waste there anymore. It's a totally different facility than it was in '94. What Clarice accomplished for her community and family was nothing short of amazing."
In the late afternoon we visit with R. J. and his wife. A motorcycle is parked in their den, one wall of which is lined with trophies and medals. R. J., a lithe, handsome man, with his hair shaved over the ears and hanging long and silky in the back, is a national arm-wrestling champion, too. R. J.'s accent is even stronger than Danny's. He sounds like this: Dey figgered de people don hear won say nuttin. "That's the thing about Cajun people," he says. "You push them around too long and they fight back."

Though the case has been legally settled, it still riles R. J. "The government wasn't worried about people," he says. "It was worried about strangling oil and gas." He turns away, his voice tight with emotion. "We're not trying to stop oil and gas. We're trying to save our community." "With all our proof, we should have shut this place down five times," R. J. says. Like the rest of the residents, he knows the implications of staying may be grave, for him and for his children: greater health risks, threat of fatal disease, shortened life spans. But to leave, his family would have to walk away from their property. It would never sell, since a bank would not loan money to anyone to buy it. Nor do any of them want to leave this land they love. "There are beautiful places in this world," R. J. says. "None like this place here."

Clarice agrees. "Our roots have been here for the last hundred years," she says, throwing her hands into the air as if to embrace heaven.

"We belong here. It's not finished for me, no matter what. I still have to shut down the waste site."

Works Cited

Ray, J. (2002, May/June). Guardian of Grand Bois. Retrieved from Sierra Magazine: http://vault.sierraclub.org/sierra/200205/profile_printable.asp