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*“Glacier Northwest - Like a Cockroach on a Wedding Cake.” \**  
*Preserve Our Islands’ Fight to Protect Maury Island*

My love for Vashon was cultivated when I was young. From the age of one, summers throughout my life have included my mom and me taking the Fauntleroy Ferry from West Seattle to the little island across Puget Sound. I have distinct memories of impatiently waiting at packed ferry terminals, my skin growing hot and sticky with anticipation.

The smell of salty sea air wafted inside our car as we drove up and down hilly roads before arriving at a corner of Maury Island, where my mom’s friend Jessica lived with her husband and their fat orange cat, Buster. Maury is a small island that was connected to Vashon in 1913 by a man-made isthmus.

While my attachment to the island stems from the memories I associate with it - biking to Dockton Park, wading into the Sound, and looking for beach glass and driftwood near the lighthouse - the place itself is an oasis for its beautiful vistas and seascapes. From its high points, one can see breathtakingly clear views of Mount Rainier and look down the hillsides onto rugged beaches below.

Unbeknownst to me as a two-year-old, innocently stalking Buster in the vegetable patch, Jessica Lisovsky and her husband, JW Turner, were entering a 12-year struggle that began in 1998 against a multi-national corporation. The fight between Preserve Our Islands, as the group they belonged to was called, and the mining company Glacier Northwest (GNW) would be a story that spanned the majority of my lifetime.

\*Bumper sticker created by POI during their fight against Glacier Northwest

The Steilacoom Gravel and Sand Mine first opened on Maury Island in the 1890s as a major source of construction material for Seattle and Tacoma. Barges travelled to the pit to transport sand and gravel to ports along Puget Sound. In 1968, after receiving government approval, GNW's predecessor Lone Star Northwest obtained and built Pioneer Mine, located south of the Steilacoom Mine. Mining began there and a new dock was built for loading barges with sand and gravel. The mine closed in 1978 (Neugebauer).

In 1990, the original Steilacoom Mine reached the end of its life. To continue meeting resource demands in the mid 1990s, Glacier Northwest submitted proposals to reopen Pioneer Mine and reconstruct the deteriorated dock. GNW was proposing to create the largest sand and gravel mine in the United States on Maury Island. They planned to mine seven and a half million tons of gravel every year for 30 years, the equivalent of extracting nearly 10 percent of Maury Island, according to Lisovsky. Additionally, GNW planned to load huge barges at the dock 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. They also planned to extend the dock a total of 305 feet into the water, almost the length of a football field (Welch).

“The region needed gravel to build a third runway at SeaTac Airport,” said Lisovsky. “The existing pit was innocuous. Nobody on Maury thought it would become a big operation again.”

Glacier Northwest delivered the news to Maury Island residents at the Gold Beach neighborhood meeting, when their representatives showed up and announced that mining would commence in 60 days. Sharon Nelson, a resident of Gold Beach, brought

the news to the Vashon Community Council, where Lisovsky and Turner found out about it.

Nelson, currently Washington's 34th district Senator, founded Preserve Our Islands (POI) in 1998 as a grassroots organization committed to preventing Glacier Northwest's mine expansion on Maury Island. POI would eventually grow to include nearly 500 regular donors and many helping hands. In 2001, POI succeeded in persuading the Washington State Department of Ecology to conduct a study of the proposed mine region. The study, lead by biologists, revealed "elevated levels" of arsenic and lead in the soil. Once mining began, this human carcinogen could be released into the aquifer, causing developmental disabilities in humans who drank the contaminated water (Abbett). The source of the arsenic and lead contamination was Tacoma's now-closed Asarco copper smelter plant that operated from 1905 to 1985 (Abbett).

Glacier Northwest responded to the study's conclusions by proposing to create a sealed berm to contain the contaminated soil. By the time mining would finish, the berm pile was estimated to be 30 feet high, 150 feet wide, and 2,100 feet long (Neugebauer).

"We really thought we could win this on the science. We thought these studies would show that this mine expansion was an environmental disaster waiting to happen. As islanders, we accepted and needed a mine, but one that was for island use; *the expansion* was the issue," said Lisovsky. "The biologists agreed with our concerns, but they didn't get to make the decisions. Companies like Glacier Northwest have major lobbyists who can influence a legislature."

For the islanders who lived next door, the mine would have negatively impacted their way of life. Their home values would have dropped by up to 30 percent, according to former POI President Turner. Moreover, the proposed dock site and mine were above Maury Island's sole-source aquifer. Glacier Northwest's plans to excavate within 15 feet of the islands' aquifer would have threatened Vashon-Maury's water supply (Neugebauer).

In 2004, the nearshore area was declared a State Aquatic Reserve and a National Marine Protected Area. Maury's waters offer plentiful eelgrass beds, which feeder fish like herring, surf smelt, and lance consume. Salmon rely on these fish for sustenance, and endangered Orca whales feed on the salmon. In its 2007 Final Puget Sound Salmon Recovery Plan, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Service emphasized the importance of the Maury Island shoreline to Chinook salmon, saying, "The preservation of this area cannot be overestimated in its value to Chinook recovery." NOAA's plan also advised that the Maury nearshore "be given the highest level of protection from development." (Carey)

POI hired an attorney and continued to fight Glacier Northwest in court with scientific evidence of the mine's destruction to the area.

"We thought the state legislature was certainly going to see that the mine and dock needed to be stopped on the basis of the aquatic reserve," said Lisovsky. "We [POI] discovered how politics works in real life; that was a very sad day. The majority of legislators didn't want to go against an established business that had already achieved some permits and jumped through some hoops successfully. We had to go home and then go onto the next thing, and that was raising money to go to court."

In 2005, with Turner as POI's president, the board decided to kick off a capital campaign to raise \$300,000 for the legal battle to stop the mine expansion.

“Raising money for a ‘bricks and mortar’ project is one thing; Preserve Our Islands was asking people to give thousands of dollars to keep things exactly the way they were,” said Lisovsky on the difficulty of fundraising for POI. “Foundations want to give money for something with a tangible result that can be quantified. They don’t want to give money for lawyers to go to court.”

As the case continued to build momentum, the stakes for POI rose. Glacier Northwest demonstrated their power by suing former POI President Sharon Nelson. The case went to an ombudsman, and Nelson was exonerated. Each of POI's five consecutive presidents was advised to carry an extra homeowner's insurance rider of one million dollars.

Unfortunately, in 2008, the Washington State Supreme Court decided not to hear POI's case against GNW. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) issued Glacier Northwest the final permit it needed to build its dock, claiming that the pier would not “result in significant impacts to the human environment.” POI filed an appeal of the USACE's decision, and the case began to make its way toward Federal court (Timeline...Beachcomber).

As the David and Goliath struggle prepared to go to Federal Court, people from all around Vashon became increasingly determined to stop the mine. POI enlisted the help of a group called The Backbone Campaign to attract the media and generate awareness around the proposed mine. The Backbone Campaign training for direct action prepared islanders to protest Glacier Northwest's mine expansion by putting themselves

physically at risk; the group went out in kayaks to interfere with cranes set up to work on the mine, and chained themselves in the way of trucks. One media event called on islanders to stand in formation so that, when viewed from above, they resembled a huge killer whale (Brown).

In 2009, POI went to Federal Court, where United States District Judge Ricardo Martinez ruled (to the delight of POI) that no more work could be done on the loading dock until the USACE prepared a full-blown environmental impact statement. He determined that the Corps erred by not thoroughly assessing how operation of the pier might harm Puget Sound's Chinook salmon and Orcas, both of which are protected by the Endangered Species Act. With this decision, Martinez set the precedent for stricter environmental review on development affecting the Sound's delicate nearshore environment (Welch). He also required that the Corps "consult" with other agencies about the potential harm to threatened and endangered species (Dunagan).

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers did not appeal the court's ruling, and Glacier Northwest chose not to pursue the mine expansion. In 2010, King County purchased Glacier Northwest's mine site on Maury Island and turned it into a 235-acre King County Marine Park (Chasan).

"On Maury Island we have a chance to protect the longest remaining piece of undeveloped shoreline in King County," King County Executive Dow Constantine said at a news conference at West Seattle's Me-Kwa-Mooks Park. "That's why I've spent the last 12 years of my public life advocating for the protection of Maury Island shoreline."

Lisovsky and fellow POI members were ecstatic that their efforts ended in success.

“It was quite a time. It was stressful and people sacrificed a lot. Marriages were stressed and people were smoking too many cigarettes. But it was rewarding and intense and relationships were built,” she said. “We also got to throw one hell of a party to thank the island for its support over all those years!”

Although this ended in success, Lisovsky noted that this is not the norm for many communities fighting corporations. “These kinds of fights go on all the time and very few people win them because the ‘big guys’ have money and lobbyists. It’s a sad commentary on our democracy. If this had happened in Rainier Beach or White Center, they probably would’ve had a mine.”

The struggle between Preserve Our Islands and Glacier Northwest demonstrates the inspiring success of a tiny community prevailing over a multi-national corporation. Although proving that David *can* overcome Goliath, Vashon-Maury Island’s triumph is not typical and the Glacier Mine case illustrates the power that money and influence have in our society. Still, the persistence and determination of individuals, like those in Preserve Our Islands, show the power a group of concerned citizens holds when united by a common cause. With tenacity and collaboration, we can take the first steps at unhinging the great door of influence that money holds in our country.



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