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In the emotionally charged run-up to their lopsided victory on Tuesday, political organizers for **Frack Free Denton** and their allies employed some weird weaponry against their well-financed oil and gas industry adversaries.

A behind-the-scenes look at the anti-fracking campaign reveals how a relatively tiny group of combatants relied on creative tactics and political gimmickry to outmaneuver pro-fracking forces that outspent them 10-to-1. Their arsenal included puppet shows, flash mob-style improvisational dances and coffin races.

The strategy worked. Voters approved the ban 59 percent to 41.

Take their puppet show, for example. As an opening act for the "Polka the Vote" kickoff party last month featuring Brave Combo at the Quakertown Park amphitheater, three key players in the anti-fracking movement - Tara Linn Hunter, Angie Holliday and Niki Chochrek - performed an over-the-top spoof of the energy industry's motives to drill within the city limits.

The play, dubbed "Puppets for the Industry," opened with a fat puppet named Mr. Moneybags, who delivered a speech while wearing a top hat and suit, with cigarette in hand.

"Hello, little town of **Denton**," Mr. Moneybags said. "I'm here to help you. You see, all that gas is stuck inside the rock. So I've come here to liberate it, to set it free. Just a little water, a little sand, a few chemicals, you'll hardly notice us. Why, in fact, the earth will be healthier after we're done without all that gas trapped inside."

But puppets Jimmy and Judy, representing ordinary citizens of **Denton**, weren't fooled.

"He wants to frack under our homes for a profit," said Judy.

"Yeah, he sounds like a real gas hole to me," Jimmy said.

Mr. Moneybags realized his arguments weren't persuasive. So he turned to his Propaganda Machine, a bizarre cardboard creature, to overcome the town's skepticism. In a shrieking voice, the cardboard creature urged Mr. Moneybags to "make them think they need you - make them think their kids will fall off broken swing sets if they don't allow you to put benzene in their lungs."

"That is brilliant," Mr. Moneybags said.

With "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" playing in the background, Hunter, Holliday and Chochrek

emerged from behind the puppet curtain, surrounded a microphone, and sang, "The fumes in the air might be a bit concerning, but fracking is your town's best friend." As the "Frackettes" danced and sang, Mr. Moneybags was gleeful. He assured the crowd: "So you can all go home and rest assured, your town is in good hands with us!"

For the moms and dads, children and grandparents who may not have been involved in the fracking debate, the show provided a half-hour of fun, frivolity and free entertainment. But to the puppeteers - Hunter, Holliday and Chochrek - the issues raised by "Puppets for the Industry" was no laughing matter. They're convinced that hydraulic fracturing is poisoning **Denton's** air and water, posing serious health risks for ordinary citizens.

"It's a human rights issue," said Hunter, the volunteer coordinator for the **Frack Free Denton** campaign.

The pro-fracking crowd watched the vote turn against them Tuesday night during an election watch party sponsored by U.S. Rep. Michael Burgess at the University of North Texas' Apogee Stadium.

Opponents of the ban accused the other side of engaging in a "a lot of misinformation that we were unfortunately the victims of," said **Denton** County GOP chairwoman Dianne Edmondson. "I'm disappointed as a citizen and a taxpayer. My taxes will probably go up, and my services will probably go down because of all the legal fees and loss of revenue. But it will be challenged and found unconstitutional. It's not over."

Bobby Jones, co-chairman and treasurer of **Denton** Taxpayers for a Strong Economy, which fought the ban, said the ban on fracking will diminish his family income from mineral royalties.

"We're going to give it a little bit of time, and then we'll be taking legal action," he said.

But the leaders of the anti-fracking campaign argued that royalty payments shouldn't trump residents' health. To allow fracking in residential neighborhoods hurts **Denton's** air quality, which already gets an "F" rating from the American Lung Association. The oil and gas industry argues that there is no scientific proof linking **Denton's** poor air quality to fracking.

In neighborhoods meetings along Vintage Boulevard and Bonnie Brae Street, parents compared "how often their kids had nosebleeds since fracking moved in," Hunter, one of the Frackettes, recalled. Holding back tears, she added, "For me, it became an issue of justice for that neighborhood."

Some of these families live only a few hundred feet from gas wells that were "grandfathered in" before the city passed regulations in 2013 preventing drilling within 1,200 feet of any residence. Feeling abandoned by the City Council, these residents joined the **Denton** Drilling Awareness Group and the North Texas Students Against Fracking to put the future of fracking in **Denton** directly in the hands of voters.

"We said, 'We're not going to ask City Council anymore. We're going to ask the people whether they want this in their town or not,'" Hunter said.

The anti-fracking alliance formed the **Frack Free Denton** campaign to start a petition drive in February. Chochrek and Holliday became deputy registrars. Only registered **Denton** voters could sign the petition. Their goal was to collect at least 2,000 signatures, enough to force the City Council to either ban fracking inside the city limits or put the issue to voters.

Canvassing in neighborhoods with gas drilling going on left a deep impression on Chochrek and Holliday.

"It was so loud," said Chochrek. "I kept looking over my shoulder thinking an 18-wheeler was coming up the road."

And at night, the lights from atop the towering drilling rigs were "blinding," she said.

Chochrek and Holliday set up a table on the UNT campus twice a week "to let people know what was going on in **Denton**" and to collect signatures to stop fracking in the city.

Later, **Frack Free Denton's** voting drive on campus encountered stiff resistance from student groups opposed to the fracking ban: the UNT chapters of College Republicans and Young Conservatives of Texas. The groups enlisted about 20 students to campaign against the ban - manning tables to pass out pro-fracking literature intended to undermine what they considered to be biased, anti-industry press coverage.

"It's not a fair fight," claimed Baileigh Poston, vice chairwoman of College Republicans.

The groups opposed to fracking agreed that it's not a fair fight - not because of the press coverage but because **Denton Taxpayers for a Strong Economy**, the main group opposing the ban, raised more than \$700,000 since July attempting to foil ban supporters through a barrage of mailings, Internet advertisements, billboards and other means.

Outgunned on the advertising and marketing front - the **Frack Free Denton** campaign raised only \$75,000 - the anti-fracking organizers decided the only way they could possibly win the battle was through entertainment venues that would attract big crowds and call attention to their cause.

One such attention-getter was a mobile coffin.

"We figured the coffin would go well with the theme of fracking - fracking causing health issues and things like that," said Jeff McClung, a sculptor and staffer in UNT's College of Visual Arts and Design who worked on the **Frack Free Denton** campaign. He built a coffin with wheels and entered it in the coffin races held during **Denton's** Day of the Dead Festival on Oct. 25.

"We didn't win anything, but it was a lot of fun," McClung said. Best of all, "we got the press out," he said.

Stunts like these were an important part of the campaign. But another, more difficult task was getting voters to the polls. During the two weeks of early voting, **Frack Free Denton** had at least one volunteer at each polling station in **Denton** at all hours that polls were open.

Since the **Frack Free Denton** voting drive was launched in August, the group held weekly meetings at private homes and the Greenhouse Restaurant to organize public awareness events and to train new canvassers in the art and craft of political persuasion.

Each week, Hunter would call her **Frack Free Denton** brigade to attention. Two volunteers with the campaign, Corey Troiani and Lyndi Cavett, had extensive experience in door-to-door canvassing through their work with Texas Campaign for the Environment.

Troiani and Cavett trained the new canvassers on how to get out the vote: Walk down one side of a street and come back down the other side to avoid crossing the street over and over, saving time and avoiding cars. Have your clipboard at your side when you knock confidently - if a prospect sees the clipboard through the peephole, they'll peg you as a salesman. Mention you are from **Denton**, and that you want votes, not money.

Each canvasser was handed a fact sheet and a clipboard. The organizers divided **Denton** into manageable parts, called "turfs," and black-and-white maps were printed on letter-size paper.

Hunter highlighted a walkable section of a street on each map and assigned each canvasser about 50 houses. She also armed them with folders with information about the proposed ban and about hydraulic fracturing's potential environmental consequences, which the industry vehemently disputes.

Troiani and Cavett went over the mechanics of how to register citizens to vote. They also reviewed more subtle acts of persuasion: everything from body posture to making eye contact with whoever opens the door. Canvassers included parents and grandparents, college students and young professionals like T opher Jones.

A few weeks ago, Jones knocked on the door of a townhouse on Fulton Street, and a 40-something-year-old man, who identified himself as Michael, came out in athletic shorts and a Texas flag T-shirt. Jones introduced himself as a neighbor out campaigning for the fracking ban. Michael noted that he'd seen the yard signs - for and against fracking - but didn't know much about the issue.

Jones told Michael that **Denton** has poor air quality and a higher-than-average rate of childhood asthma. Michael sounded concerned, but pointed out that he wasn't registered to vote. Jones moved quickly, handing Michael a voter registration card. Michael filled it out and dropped it in his mailbox as Jones cheered him on. Jones congratulated him on registering to vote.

Convincing voters like Michael to back their cause gave many of the ground troops in the **Frack Free Denton** campaign high hopes that they could pull off a major upset in Tuesday's referendum. At a packed watch party on election night at Dan's Silverleaf, the mood of the crowd turned from nervous to celebratory as early returns came in showing 59 percent of votes were cast in favor of the ban.

As television crews from around the Dallas-Fort Worth area pushed cameras through the mob of parents, professionals and retirees, college students and professors, the chatter turned into a roar

after a rumor swirled around 8:30 p.m. that at least one media outlet had already called the election in favor of the ban.

Hunter, Holliday and Chochrek jumped up and down, hugging and congratulating each other. They looked like they had just won a million-dollar lottery.

They realized they had accomplished something historical, becoming the first city in Texas - the heartland of the oil and gas industry - to ban fracking.

Hunter compared the victory to slaying a giant.

"I'm glad we did it here," she said. "We're in Texas. The message it sends to the world - it's like the belly of the beast. We just banned fracking [in the state] where it was invented."

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