



Carmage Walls Commentary Prize

2017 Entry Form

Name of Author(s): Dink NeSmith

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What is the subject/title of the entry? Kicking Ash and Taking Names: a David-and-Goliath Environmental Battle, Circa 2016

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Is your newspaper under 50,000 circulation or above 50,000 circulation? Under 50,000

Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved. (This space will expand as you type in your comments.)

In 1948, Dink NeSmith, owner and chairman of *The Press-Sentinel*, was born in a hospital 300 feet from his Jesup, Ga., newspaper. That's why he has led the passionate fight to keep his hometown from potentially becoming America's largest dumpsite of toxic coal ash as well as the Eastern Seaboard's trash bin. He immediately labeled the clash as a David-and-Goliath battle, circa 2016.

Since January 2016, when *The Press-Sentinel* discovered what Republic Services, the nation's second-largest waste-management company, was planning, he didn't sleep a full night until April 5, 2017. "I threw my heart into this fight, and my wallet followed it," he said. "And if I were on my deathbed, I would find the strength to get up and throw one more punch."

Punching is what he and his newspaper have done for the past 16 months. Before Republic, aka Goliath, waved the white flag on April 5, NeSmith had written 58 columns on the subject. Additionally, he coordinated with freelance cartoonist Jim Powell to create 70 cartoons aimed at Republic and Wayne County commissioners, who were doing little to thwart the landfill owner's scheme.

Three times, NeSmith met with Republic's area president, who initially said, "We are willing to negotiate." In the first meeting, *The Press-Sentinel's* chairman asked, "Are you willing to take toxic

coal-ash off the table, and are you willing to take the rail-spur application off the table?” To both questions, the Republic executive said, “Absolutely not.” With those two answers, NeSmith leaned over and said, “Then, we are at war.”

Some of the highlights of the war included:

*These six columns are a half-dozen of the total 60 columns NeSmith has written on the subject. Cartoons by Jim Powell illustrated many of those columns.

*With its funds, *The Press-Sentinel* hired a team of environmental attorneys, and later raised more than \$1 million in pledges to fight the proposed wetlands-destroying rail spur, which would allow 100 train cars of toxic coal ash—per day—to be dumped in Republic’s private landfill in Wayne County.

**The Press-Sentinel* published three ad-free educational special editions to inform its readers of the dangers of Republic’s plans, not counting dozens of news stories about the environmental controversy. In addition, the newspaper contributed more than 12,000 inches of free advertising.

*A major turning point in the battle was NeSmith’s appeal to the 39th president of the United States, Jimmy Carter, to reach out to Republic’s largest shareholder—Bill Gates. In a handwritten letter to the world’s richest man, President Carter asked Gates to reconsider the company’s plans.

In the beginning, few people—including the county commissioners—believed nothing could be done to derail Republic. However, a groundswell of grassroots support—along with growing state and national attention—started giving Goliath second thoughts. On April 5, 2017, NeSmith met with Republic’s area president to learn the company was withdrawing its U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ rail-spur permit and its coal-ash plans.

Looking back, NeSmith said, “We believe strong newspapers help to build strong communities. That’s why we must pump iron *and* ink in every edition.”

NeSmith plans to publish a book later this year about the battle titled, “Kicking Ash and Taking Names: a David-and-Goliath Environmental Battle, Circa 2016.”

Here's to Republic and a giant step in right direction

By Dink NeSmith

With its meager start as Station Number 6, Jesup is a built-by-trains town. Among my most vivid childhood memories is lying in my bunk bed, listening to train whistles and being rocked to sleep by the rumbling rails next to our tiny apartment in the back of NeSmith Funeral Home. The *click-clack* had a calming effect on a 10-year-old boy.

That was then, but *that* changed in January 2016. With the surprise discovery of Central Virginia Properties, LLC's request to build a wetlands-destroying rail spur to haul in toxic coal ash, future train whistles posed the potential to pound sweet dreams into environmental nightmares. Until *The Press-Sentinel* reported Republic Services' subsidiary's stealth move to haul in up to 10,000 tons per day of poisonous waste, I was just like most of you—asleep.

I don't have to repeat every detail of this 15-month saga, our modern-day version of a David-and-Goliath battle. You know the horror and outrage that's dominated talk around supper tables and coffee corners in Wayne County. Even schoolkids dropped piggybank coins into the grassroots legal fund to fight dangerous, what-others-don't-want trainloads in Republic's private Broadhurst Environmental Landfill, which is 10 miles from our beautifully restored, historic train depot.

Since this alarming revelation, I have been among the many whose sleep has been disturbed for more than a year. At bedtime last Tuesday, I was still staring at the ceiling. My mind continued to race, as if it were competing in the Daytona 500. By Saturday, my pillow seemed a little softer.

Why could I relax, just a bit?

In a Wednesday visit with Republic's area president, Drew Isenhour did what he said he would do: keep his word. That sit-down was our third. Our first didn't go very well. It was clear that we were two locomotives roaring toward a head-on pile-up. The loyal solidier of Republic made it clear the \$9 billion waste-management giant knew what it was doing. I made it clear that the community couldn't *and* wouldn't give up its pushback. We believe the ultrasensitive watersheds of the Altamaha and Satilla rivers are a horrible place to dump

toxic waste. Money would never ease our fears.

During our second face-to-face, Drew presented some hypothetical what-ifs. Those who heard his suggestions unanimously shook their heads, but I could see Drew was trying. Over his 30-year career, starting as a truck driver, he found his niche as a people person, a problem solver—the proverbial fellow with the broom and shovel, cleaning up messes others had made. Indeed, Republic's tactics had caused, as my mother would say, a “Mell-of-a-Hess.” Drew acknowledged as much, giving rise to my respect of him.

One of my heroes is the late Robert W. Woodruff, who built Coca-Cola into a global powerhouse. My parents were married in a house—next to the country store which my grandfather operated—on Woodruff's Ichauway Plantation in Baker County. And every time I sip from one of those iconic glass bottles, I can hear the “Boss,” as he was affectionately known, saying: “*There's no limit to what man can accomplish when it doesn't matter who gets the credit.*”

Republic's April 6 announcement to withdraw its rail-spur and coal-ash plans sent a wave of cheers across Coastal Georgia. And who gets credit for that? Get out your pencil, because the list—under the heading of “Teamwork really works”—is longer than those four proposed mile-long rail-spur tracks. This community's concerns were embraced by thousands of people we don't even know. A legion of people earned gold stars. You demonstrated your faith in the mantra of that British bulldog, Winston Churchill, who growled: “*Never, never, never give up!*” That accolade belongs to Drew Isenhour, too. Just as we did, he wanted an amicable resolve.

So, where are we now?

Republic did the right thing by listening and responding. For now, we can rest easier. However, we *cannot* waste this crisis. Wayne County and Republic must benefit from the past 15 months of turmoil. What just happened is a giant step in the right direction, but *click-clack*. There's still a trainload of work yet to be done here, as well as in Atlanta and Washington.

We must stay awake.

You know what happens when you snooze.

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(For more commentaries visit www.dinknesmith.com)

