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“A Civil Action” Shows How Community Is Often Forgotten

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'Civil Action' shows how community is often forgotten

AS I SEE IT

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Special to The Star

The most memorable American trials - like the most memorable American movies - are dominated by powerful personalities. And when the American movie is about an American trial (real or imagined), the effect doubles, whether we are speaking of the quirky and animated jurors in "Twelve Angry Men" or the fiery Dustin Hoffman/Meryl Streep standoff in "Kramer vs. Kramer."

Steven Zaillian's "A Civil Action" follows this tradition by offering up John Travolta as Jan Schlichtman, the obsessive lawyer who sacrifices all in battling two corporations that he believes have contaminated the water of the working-class town of Woburn, Mass.

Yet despite the film's careful, fact-based exploration of this lawyer's manic quest, something important is missing that prevents Woburn's story from being completely told - the people of Woburn itself.

As Jonathan Harr's narrative account of the real Woburn case points out, the residents seized an active role from the very beginning. It was Anne Anderson, mother of a young boy lost to leukemia, who worked relentlessly to form the community's action network, questioned other parents about everything from family illness to rust-stained laundry, and posited the crucial connection between the community's leukemia clusters and its water supply.

But these stories were glossed over in the actual courtroom and
are glossed over again in Zaillian's film.

In the actual case the judge ruled early on to postpone the resident plaintiffs' testimony until after issues of the defendants' role in water contamination had been decided. The real Jan Schlictman showed little more confidence in his clients' judgment by withholding information about settlement talks and excluding them from important strategic decisions, apparently ignoring that without his clients' early work, no case would have existed.

In his screenplay, Zaillian sacrifices the inspiring energy of the Woburn residents. Yet understanding these community groups is necessary to appreciate the extent of environmental tragedy and to engineer effective responses. In contaminated communities, harm extends far beyond individual illness or death in particular households. A pattern of clustered incidents can threaten to unravel the community itself.

The leukemia deaths in Woburn placed stress on marriages (at least one to the breaking point) and drove a wedge between the families of industrial workers and those of cancer victims.

Toxic releases in Louisiana's infamous "Cancer Alley" along the Mississippi River have been associated with widespread instances of post-traumatic stress, "survivor's remorse" and episodes of debilitating fear that can recur several years later. Medical exigencies can require longtime residents to move out, disrupting social and economic networks and breaking up extended families. Such insult is intensified when one considers that industrial and agricultural contamination is much more likely among the poor and the working class.

The best hope for effective social change in this area lies in the collective. Today thousands of everyday people - most of them women - participate in grassroots environmental organizations, fighting toxic struggles. These groups are often most successful when they maintain tight control over their political and legal agendas, keeping their lawyers "on tap." The real hero of the struggle in Woburn was the community itself, led by a persistent and creative mother committed to discovering the truth.
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