



## Still the Sam

Sam Pratt, activist featured in *Two Square Miles*, answers readers' questions

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**Q. What is your advice to an internally pissed-off and externally timid young person who is interested in community organizing? -- Brittany Hopkins, Newark, N.J.**

**A.** If you're timid, start by talking with people one-on-one or in small groups. Practice makes less imperfect, I always say.

My advice to anyone interested in any non-standard career path (such as community organizing) is just to follow your nose and do what you can, within your own means. You don't have to change the whole world overnight; it is enough to try to change one small corner of it. Adopt your apartment building or your block or your immediate neighbors, and focus on manageable goals. There are obviously few well-paying entry-level jobs fighting the good fight, as opposed to working for a big corporation. But if you can make yourself useful, and develop skills that others value, you will find work that both satisfies you and pays the bills.



**Community organizer Sam Pratt.**

**Q. It seems pretty logical that folks would be concerned about polluters in their own community. But what can we do to get people motivated to take care of issues in communities that are not their own? -- Grist editors**

**A.** Well, it is not as easy to motivate people about polluters in one's own community as one might think. First you have to get through the media logjam, overcome people's fears and inhibitions, deal with the company's rhetoric, deter folks from accepting money in exchange for support, and so on. The cement plant -- which seemed like a totally foolish idea from the first time I heard about it -- took 6.5 years to stop, in a town of 7,500 people and a county of 65,000 people, because the company was prepared to spend \$58 million, and our public officials started out as 100 percent supportive of the project.

Once a community has gone through a controversy like the one we experienced here, its population is much more likely to be interested in caring about other communities, and the global context of the issues involved. Unfortunately, many people don't wake up until the lone wolf is at the door -- never mind that giant pack of wolves that's still 100 miles away.

So how do you activate people who have not yet had a wolf show up? Education is of course at the core of all these issues, and not just education in a classroom -- how we run our businesses, what we buy in stores, where we shop, whether we discuss these issues in social situations, whether we write letters to

the editor, etc., are all part of that education.

**Q. What sort of tactics did you use to engage the individuals at the cement plant to consider sustainable choices? -- Jenneen Hartshorn, Fremont, Calif.**

**A.** In the first three to six months of the fight, we guardedly "interacted" with the cement company. As the situation became more adversarial, as the extent of the threat became more widely understood, and as we began to gain critical mass, the company became less willing to talk, and we became less willing to compromise. It wasn't really an option with a company hell-bent on building the cheapest, dirtiest plant possible to maximize their own profit at our community's expense. Also, as the fight went on for over six years, their public relations staff continually changed, so establishing a relationship was somewhat pointless.

One thing we were very willing to do was to debate St. Lawrence Cement publicly, in part because we were better informed than their overconfident and shallow PR people. The company became very leery of debating us, but when asked by prominent media or an elected official to debate, it's hard for both sides not to participate without looking like they have something to hide.

We got very steeped in policy issues, and we used our research to both gain media credibility and to drive wedges in the company's regulatory strategy. We hired a major industrial engineering firm (which had never worked for a citizen's group before) and lawyers who had worked both sides of the aisle.

Legally, our initial approach was double-edged: By showing the company what an appropriately scaled, well-designed, sensitively sited plant looked like, and demanding that there be enforceable conditions that did not allow the company to treat fines as a small price of doing business, we either would wind up with a smaller, cleaner, more appropriate plant -- or the company would balk at the precedent and cost of such a project, and back out. As time went on, we realized that this company was not one we would trust to run a gas station, let alone a massive, coal-burning facility. At that point we began aiming to just stop the plant entirely.

**Q. What was it like transitioning from your work as a reporter to working as an activist? Do you think your reporting work has shaped your activism at all? -- Name not provided**

**A.** The job of a reporter is to learn about random topics quickly, and to digest and condense that information so the general public can assimilate it quickly. A good reporter tries to accomplish this without oversimplifying, and asks tough questions of all sources. That skill set was especially useful in the early stages of the first two battles I got involved with, because the developers were throwing out a ton of slogans and misleading data.

It was also helpful to know how the media worked from the inside. Meanwhile, it was an eye-opener to see what it felt like to be on the other side of the printing press. Most reporters would benefit from having an issue they care about deeply covered in a newspaper or TV report; then they'd see how slipshod and unfair so much journalism can be. Unfortunately, citizens have to be twice as credible in their research and twice as careful about what they say, since so much deference is given to governmental sources by today's media.

**Q. Externalities, such as related health-care costs due to exposure to toxins, are often**

**overlooked in land-use debates. What action, if any, did your organization take to highlight the related health exposures to the community? -- Dorice Madronero, Suffern, N.Y.**

**A.** While we were concerned about a whole host of quality-of-life impacts (noise, vibration, visuals, lack of economic benefits, etc.), health threats were the core of our case. When people realize that cement plants of this type emit large quantities of mercury, arsenic, and lead, you've got their attention.

We were able to convince the medical staff of our local hospital to conduct an independent study of the project, and this task force voted 34 to 1 that the project would increase death rates among the elderly and heart patients, and asthma in children. One of our allies hired a major and credible health risk assessment expert to combat the company's "biostitutes" who were saying the project would be perfectly safe -- despite its being sited within a mile of said local hospital.

In addition, we were able to turn this into a regional issue by highlighting the strong potential for long-range transport of both toxins and greenhouse gases to neighboring counties and states. Eventually, the *Boston Globe*, the *Hartford Courant*, the *New York Times*, and public officials in five states came out against the project. That was key to getting New York's governor, George Pataki, to slow down what began as a juggernaut, with lots of support in Albany.

**Q.** **Just like you, I get stereotypical names thrown at me all the time, especially around family and friends. What have you found to be the best way to explain your views and get your point across to people who just don't get it, without it turning into an ugly debate where anything environmentally proactive is deemed a dirty hippie point of view? -- Rebecca Hamilton, New Bern, N.C.**

**A.** I can't advise anyone on how to deal with their family -- that's way outside my area of expertise! But the general public is another matter. The first thing is not to waste time on people who simply are not going to be convinced, no matter what you say -- and to recognize when you are in a no-win conversation. In my experience, there is always about 15 percent of the population that is immovable, for whom the facts are irrelevant.

For the rest of the population, which is susceptible to reason, having a solid, calm grip of the facts is essential. After that, for a specific issue, it can be a process of trial-and-error before you find the arguments that make people's mouths drop and minds open. The key thing is to have as many conversations as possible. Only through repeated and intense dialogue will you eventually hit upon the ideas that work -- either because you finally have a "eureka!" moment, or someone hands you a brilliant new way of thinking about the issues you have been turning over and over in your mind.

**Q.** **You seem to spend a lot of your time at home working in front of the computer, which unfortunately is the fate of many caring activists. How can we break away from this and get more, well, active, and reconnect with more folks outside the traditional channels? -- Name not provided**

**A.** Activists have to seek out and accept every invitation we can possibly get to talk with people in person -- whether it's with three people around a kitchen table, or in front of an audience of 300. No meeting is too small.

[Cesar Chavez](#) was apparently once asked, "How do you organize people so well?" He is said to have answered: "First I talk with one person. Then I talk with another." What he meant, I think, is that one must be out in the world, parlaying one conversation and one contact into another, until the commonalities and connections between issues and people come together into a potent force for change.

One method I hit upon in a previous campaign for breaking away from the computer and being active in the community was standing outside post offices on Saturday mornings, leafleting alongside supporters who live in that town. The local supporters can buttonhole their friends, get them to sign a petition, get them talking about the issue. Some people are just curious to see and meet "those people" they had heard so much about in the press. And even for those who blew past us gruffly, it was important to let them know (tacitly) that we cared enough to stand outside in the wind and rain. It wasn't just about spreading the word -- it was about humanizing the movement and showing its commitment.

**Q. Do you promote vegetarianism as a positive ethical and environmental action? -- Marylou Noble, Portland, Ore.**

**A.** I do, and think it is important to spread the word not only about the ethical implications of how we treat animals, but also the huge environmental downside of industrial farming.

It seems that health issues are one avenue for people to open their minds to vegetarianism who otherwise reject it. Others are the economic and environmental implications, of which shockingly few are aware. The best may be to find ways for people to see (in pictures and film) and to meet (in person) the animals they are eating -- so that they may come around on their own to the realization that a cow or a pig is at least as smart and sensitive as the dog or cat they protect and cherish at home. The horror pictures used by some groups are effective with a limited group, but I think a positive approach may work better with the general population.

Everything in our culture, from birth, serves to naturalize a practice -- eating the flesh of largely defenseless creatures -- that I have come to view as macabre, cruel, and unsustainable. Having eaten meat about two-thirds of my life, I can understand why people don't think about what they are putting in their mouths (or wearing on their backs), but it is a real challenge to talk about. The defensiveness and hostility one encounters, even when approaching the topic gently and indirectly, is staggering.

**Q. Can you say more about The Granger Group? -- Grist editors**

**A.** The group was formed to promote sound land-use planning in an area where many public officials and other opinion-makers hew to the Wise Use movement's skewed notions of property rights. The group's first big battle has been to challenge a multimillionaire who started bulldozing a mile-long, 40-foot-wide, asphalt motorcycle and racecar track on his property, without seeking a single permit. Could one dream up a more obnoxious symbol of American attitudes to conservation than going around in circles, burning fossil fuels, just for "fun"?

After a lot of research, awareness-raising, and public outcry, we finally got our local zoning board to rule against this project -- but the guy may be back for a second try. The bigger picture for the group is to move local officials toward a more balanced and sensitive recognition that without stable, healthy habitats, everything else in our rural area will fail -- from property values to the economy.

**Q. Per the trailer of *Two Square Miles*, there appears to be a lot of collaboration among diverse communities. Can you speak to how this dynamic unfolded and what can be done to encourage this when fighting for environmental causes, which have traditionally been considered the domain of rich, white males? -- Andrew B., Seattle, Wash.**

**A.** It is crucial for activists to recognize the financial, political, time, and language obstacles to involvement by non-"rich, white males" -- and to do whatever is possible to reach out to those communities, helping provide tools which enable and embolden people to get involved. And this can't be done from any sense of noblesse oblige, but only out of a sincere belief that all your neighbors have an equal right to participate. People can spot white guilt and condescension a mile off.

This was a challenge. There are many reasons, rooted in economics and a history of retribution, why residents of poorer communities and people of color are reluctant or unable to participate in such issues. While we had supporters in Hudson's large African-American community, there was also enormous hesitancy to be visibly involved -- and some political leaders in that community actively discouraged such involvement. The fine work of [Time & Space Limited](#), an arts and community center in Hudson, was a great help to breaking down those suspicions.

**Q. You talked a little bit about the death of grassroots groups and what you think is necessary to keep them alive. Can you elaborate on that? -- Grist editors**

**A.** There are a million ways for a grassroots group to go wrong, and very few paths to success, since the odds are often so stacked against us. But if you find the right people, support them, and let them do their work in their own way, everything else follows naturally from that sound choice. The flip side is that the best-laid plans are worthless in the wrong hands. If you have people lacking skills, commitment, integrity, and imagination enacting those plans, failure is almost assured.

Leadership is something that best emerges over time and organically. Whoever consistently follows through on the tasks everyone else is wishing would happen tends to naturally become the leader. Once that process shakes out, it is crucial to then keep an activist organization. It's easy to get bogged down in all the process-y stuff that arises so easily when people come together around a table -- the endless formation of committees, subcommittees, bylaws, points of order.

Never meet just for the sake of meeting; don't leave a meeting without everyone feeling that something specific was accomplished that furthered your goal. Better to have a working meeting where everyone puts stamps on your new mailing, and has an informal conversation while working, than another theoretical gathering where a million ideas are floated -- for someone else to do.

**Q. How often do you come across bureaucracy in your work? How do you deal with it and cope? -- Name not provided**

**A.** It is always quicker, cheaper, and easier to solve environmental crises politically than through regulatory review. If you can get your local (or county, or state) officials to address the problem legislatively, that's always the better way to go.

But today's developers are generally well advised on how to grease the skids before the public even knows that a big issue is coming, so more and more ordinary people have to gear up for long, bureaucratic fights. The first thing to do is to educate yourself on all the rules and regs that govern your

situation. Who has permitting power? What are the criteria for their decision(s)? To whom do the bureaucrats answer? Know your rights first, and then act decisively on them. And bear in mind that pretty much all bureaucracies' powers derive from politicians -- so if you're not getting anywhere through the regular channels, you may need to go over their heads.

Most important is to make sure bureaucrats know that they are being watched. Swamp them with letters, postcards, faxes, emails, and calls. Make sure your group has every possible contact, and give them tools to act on them. Media coverage also makes bureaucrats act more cautiously. If they think no one cares and no one will notice, they will generally side with the developer.

While it is critical to protect your right to appeal by documenting in writing every objection, concern, and communication with a bureaucracy, I also urge people to try to get face-to-face meetings with bureaucrats. It is much easier to ignore (or slime!) someone whom you only deal with on paper.

**Q.** **When will your manual be available and how can we obtain it? -- Glenn Pratt, Indianapolis, Ind.**

**A.** Sigh. This is the question all writers dread. Soon! I promise! [Send me an email](#) and I'll put you on the notice list, or [check my website](#).

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