

This 'Big Oil' Bust Is Killing My Town

I want us to pursue paths to cleaner, renewable energy. But not like this.

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By Carrie McKean

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MIDLAND, Texas — I cried the day I moved to Midland, the capital of our nation's oil and gas industry. Back then, almost 10 years ago, my husband's new job designing control systems for natural gas processing plants wasn't the sort of work I wanted him to take.

It didn't mesh well with my increasingly progressive principles. And so on some level, I understand the response from people when I tell them where I live: an odd mix of curiosity, pity and disgust.

Curiosity because, along with our neighbor city Odessa, we're seen as the land of "Friday Night Lights," oil barons and women with hair still bigger than Texas. Pity because all they picture is flat, thirsty land peppered with thorny mesquite and bobbing pump jacks. Never mind that the sunsets will leave you speechless. Yet ever since a drop in demand caused by this Covid-19 pandemic caused oil prices to plummet, it's the last response — disgust — that seems to be everywhere. Disgust stemming from "oil town" stereotypes. And it troubles me. Because I can't reconcile the disgust-turned-to-glee I see on social media (the "they deserve it anyway" attitude) with the Midland I've come to know.

My husband and I are native Texans. When we returned from four years in Beijing with a dog and a newborn daughter, the city quickly made us feel at home again. Over the past several weeks, as we joined the rest of the country in doing what we can to stop community spread of the coronavirus, we've been dreading another crisis in the making. One that few outside of the oil-rich Permian Basin in West Texas noticed brewing. On April 20, it happened.

Late in the afternoon, after helping my first- and third-grade daughters finish their Google Classroom assignments, I heard the price for a barrel of oil had reached 15 cents — an unfathomable number. I walked into my husband's makeshift work-from-home office to ask whether he had seen it. He had the current trading information pulled up on his screen when I walked into the room, and I felt a little relieved when I glanced at it and noticed it was at \$33.

"Oh!" I laughed sheepishly. "A second ago I thought I saw something about it being 15 cents."

He raised an eyebrow and pointed at the tiny negative sign I had missed.

It kept falling and closed at negative \$37.63 for a barrel of oil. I'm no oil expert, but I know plenty of them. And I've yet to meet a local who isn't astounded that prices fell into negative territory, that traders were paying people \$37.63 a barrel to take it off their books. (Now we'd trade that light, sweet Texas crude for toilet paper if we could.)

It's not "big oil" I'm worried about — the multinational conglomerates and the national corporations. It's my brother who just got laid off. It's a friend telling me how devastated her son was after he had to lay off a single mother. It's our Chin refugee community — displaced from Myanmar — being suddenly destabilized again as the low-skill, high-wage jobs that helped them buy houses and plant roots in their new country evaporated overnight. Their mortgages haven't.

With oil's crash, some economists say our community in Midland could be the epicenter of the coming recession for months or years. Unlike parts of the country where people are out of work until coronavirus restrictions can be lifted, jobs here went over the cliff with the price of oil. As a five-hours-from-anywhere single-industry town, there aren't other jobs just down the road. Deaths of despair, strokes and heart attacks could go up. Will those get counted the way we tick off deaths from Covid-19? Does anyone on the coastal edges of our country even care?



A water tower stands in a Midland, Tex., neighborhood. Tamir Kalifa for The New York Times

“Big oil” in West Texas is actually a hive of small businesses, many of which are run by my friends. And one of those businesses puts a roof over my head and dinner on my table. It’s what knits our community together. It’s made up of all the people I love — generous and kind. The sort of people who invest their oil profits in the community here as well as those abroad.

It seems that every day, a new For Sale signs pop up and more people I care about lose their businesses. My girls will lose classmates and teachers; I’ll lose friends. My husband might lose his job in the coming weeks. I called my best friend to share my excitement about writing this article and heard her voice crack as she described the agony of trying to save their small business in this gutted market. It’s as if everything is somehow tied to the destruction.

Sometimes it surprises me when people don’t seem to realize life is a whole lot more gray than black and white. Once I boarded an airplane with a woman wearing a “Down With Oil” shirt. I wondered if she caught the irony of her wearing it on a plane, in clothes that couldn’t have been made without oil. I hear too many online, and even on the news, acting like that woman now — rejoicing in the downfall of an industry that, like it or not, we’ll all depend upon for the foreseeable future.

Here in Midland, we are rooting for communities in our nation facing the full brunt of this health crisis. We’ve sewn masks, shuttered small businesses, canceled school and stayed six feet apart — though granted it is a bit easier out here in the wide open. But I wish I heard or saw a little bit more reciprocal solidarity.

We don’t expect anyone to “fix it” for us. But we would like to be able to speak our concerns about the economic situation we’re facing without feeling as if by valuing our community’s jobs we’re disregarding science or not valuing human life. I wish I could help you understand what it feels like to hear what sounds like some parts of this country rejoicing when we’re afraid and grieving and watching our community crumble.

I want us to pursue paths to cleaner and renewable energy. But not like this. Not via the collapse of an entire region’s economy in the course of a few weeks. This has multigenerational repercussions for us. But indifference to this oil crisis won’t hurt us alone. It will hurt our entire nation and drive us further into our respective corners in this Divided States of America.

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