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Mine issue pushed woman to activism

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Until the summer of 2008, Cathy Burger led a private, low-key life.

She helped her husband, David, operate his flooring business from their Anderson Township home and stayed involved with their six grown children and five grandchildren. The Burgers spent as much of their leisure time as they could on their 20-foot-long boat.

But in the middle of that summer, the 48-year-old woman's relatively calm life shifted into hyperdrive.

She learned that Martin Marietta Materials Inc. wanted to build an underground limestone mine near her house in Anderson Township. She feared the impact of the daily underground blasting, the dust, the noise, the 250 trucks a day and other aspects of the mining operation would have on her family and her community.

Burger, a short woman with long, black hair and a radiant smile, helped organize an anti-mining citizens group called CABOOM (Citizens Against Mining On Our Miami). Before long, she was its president.

Her life quickly became consumed by meetings, fundraising efforts, conferences, research, telephone calls, e-mails and speeches. Under her leadership, CABOOM grew from about a dozen members to more than 2,000.

"It turned into a full-time job," Burger said, sitting in the living room of her mobile home off Round Bottom Road, about 100 yards from the underground mine's 480-acre site in the vicinity of Round Bottom and Broadwell roads. "Sometimes, I would be up until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning typing e-mails. It just evolved that way."

Despite the widespread objections to the mine, the Anderson Township Board of Zoning Appeals approved the project in June by a 3-to-2 vote after 22 months of public hearings.

But the fight isn't over. CABOOM, Terrace Park, Indian Hill and Newtown are appealing the decision to Hamilton County Common Pleas Court.

Burger admitted she felt crushed by the zoning board's decision.

"I was in mourning for three days," she said.

But after three days, she regained her resolve and began planning for the next stage of the battle against Martin Marietta Materials.

"When you have a will as strong as mine, I wasn't stopping," she said. "I'm in it for the long haul."

Burger has impressed many people during the past two years with her leadership, her energy and her tact.

During his career, Tim Mara, the attorney for CABOOM, has represented many community groups fighting proposed shopping centers, apartment buildings and other developments. He said he's never worked with a community leader as motivated and effective as Burger.

"She's a dynamo," Mara said. "I don't have to hold her hand and tell her what to do."

About a dozen mining opponents met for the first time in July of 2008 at the Township Tavern, not far from the proposed mining site.

A cold fear seized Burger as she listened to details of the mine plans. She worried that the mine would ruin the aquifer that serves the water wells for her home and the nearby homes of her husband's sister and brother.

"My heart was racing," she said. "My stomach was tied in knots. I realized that this mine could actually happen, and we could lose our water source and have to move."

At that point, Burger had never been out front on a public issue.

Born and raised in Alexandria, Va., she became a senior manager for Pizza Hut, training managers for six restaurants. When she met her future husband, David Burger, he was an army staff sergeant serving as a White House chauffeur. They married and David, now 67, retired from the army. They moved to seven acres along the Little Miami River in Anderson Township his family had owned for years, and he started his own flooring business. After attending that first anti-mine meeting at the Township Tavern, Burger began volunteering for various tasks. She was such a good worker and organizer, she wound up leading the group.

"I marvel at her capacity for leadership," said Tom Winstel, who lives near the proposed mine site. "She is charismatic and never is confrontational."

Bob Palmisano, owner of Newtown Farm Market, said Burger has been great at keeping CABOOM members informed of important meetings and new developments in the case.

"She doesn't get rattled," he said. "She's the kind of person you want on your side."

Burger, a high school graduate, admits she has surprised herself during the past two years.

"We're in a fight for our lives," Burger said. "That's how I look at it."