



July-August 2009

Full Photo Digital Version: <http://www.pageturnpro.com/Alameda-Magazine/6387-Oakland-Magazine-July-2009/index.html#52>

Speak Softly and Carry a Big Green Stick

Michael Brune Kicks Butt for the Rainforest Action Network

Noelle Robbins



Photos by Lori Eanes

In many ways Michael Brune, executive director of the Rainforest Action Network—an environmental group hailed by the Wall Street Journal as “some of the most savvy environmental agitators in the business”—epitomizes the hard-nosed activist. With a twist. While there is no doubt Brune savors using aggressive in-your-face tactics against corporate adversaries, he is always so darn nice about it. In fact his motto just might be:

Speak Softly and Carry a Big Green Stick

In the sun-dappled nursery in his Alameda home, Michael Brune lifts his baby, Sebastian, above his head and lowers him for a gentle kiss on the cheek. Father’s eyes are full of tenderness. Son sports a delighted grin. Another boost almost brushes the baby against the ceiling, not surprising as Brune stretches 6-foot-4 in his stocking feet, his presence commanding, yet immensely soothing. This is a guy you can trust.

A few weeks later, on a frigid snowy morning in Washington, D.C., Brune, executive

director of the San Francisco-based Rainforest Action Network, or RAN, raises something else to his lips—a bullhorn—to spur on more than 2,000 eager protesters engaged in what Time magazine calls “the biggest act of civil disobedience against global warming in American history.” Paradoxically, their goal, to shut down the coal-fired Capitol Power Plant, was acknowledged and addressed several days earlier by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid who, bowing to increasing demand from RAN and others, had proposed switching the plant to natural gas. Nonetheless, the demonstrators responded with gusto to Brune’s inspiring call to further action against one of the biggest sources of green house gases—coal combustion. This is a guy who can excite the masses. He also knows now to bend those in power to his will.

And bend they do. Brune is the driving force behind some of the most ingenious, antagonistic, ultimately triumphant campaigns ever carried out against some of the biggest names in the corporate world. During his 10-plus years at RAN, first as campaign manager and then executive director, Brune, 37, has designed and implemented strategies that have fundamentally changed the way corporate giants Home Depot, Kinko’s, Lowe’s, Citi (formerly Citigroup) and Bank of America do business.

As its name suggests, RAN is a nonprofit dedicated to protecting rainforests, but its mission is far broader. RAN pursues the goal of shaping a sustainable global environment, one that protects old-growth forests, promotes human rights and seeks to break the world’s addiction to coal and oil. Under Brune’s leadership, RAN does not attack businesses with the intent of destroying them, just their practices. RAN never hesitates to use hard-line market activism—civil disobedience, onsite protests, letter-writing campaigns and advertisements—to convince those at the top they have the most to gain by becoming part of RAN’s solution. RAN’s slogan “Environmentalism with Teeth” says it all. And Brune has his bared, ready to sink them into any industry violating the earth or its people.

For a moment, it is hard to reconcile this tough, no-holds-barred, environmental rabble-rouser and organizer-in-chief who obviously relishes the power he wields with the mushy dad gently cuddling his tiny son.

Brune is comfortable with both personas. “I bring my kids to work with me every day, in my head. Every negotiation with a business leader includes thoughts of my kids and the planet they will inherit,” he says. Brune’s paramount priority is clear: It is his calling in life to help make the world a better place for his children—and for the rest of us.

Brune’s direction early in life was far from clear. Brune’s biggest inspiration and personal hero is his father, Robert Brune. If you ask the senior Brune whether he envisioned his son at the helm of an environmental nonprofit powerhouse, the senior Brune will probably tell you, frankly, no.

“Without sounding critical,” Robert Brune says, “Mike was such an easygoing little boy. We often wondered what he would wind up doing.” Not that he was a lazy kid by any means, his father says. “Mike was a hard worker. We told the kids everything you get in life, you have to work for.”

Mike Brune agrees: “I was brought up with a very strong, no-nonsense attitude towards work.” And a deep sense of community involvement. His mother, Patricia Brune, a public school teacher, worked for 25 years with special-needs students. His father ran a successful construction business and served as mayor of Toms River, New Jersey—Mike Brune’s hometown—for two terms during Brune’s preschool years. “My siblings are all involved in making the world a better place,” Brune says. “We were always taught, growing up, to give back to the community.”

That Brune would throw himself into whatever career he chose with an unassailable work ethic was a given. And his childhood nickname, “The Count,” offered a hint of what that career might be. When he was about 8, he used every opportunity out with his family to count everything in sight: chairs and tables in restaurants, seats in movie

theaters. Accounting seemed a logical route for the young man fascinated with numbers and, for a while, that is exactly where he was headed: A responsible job by day, he figured, and community involvement in the off hours.

It had never occurred to him that he could earn a living giving back—until his first job interview changed his life immediately and forever.

Following graduation from West Chester University of Pennsylvania in 1992 and a post-college jaunt around the United States, Canada and Alaska with a buddy, Brune returned to the Philadelphia area with two degrees (accounting and economics), \$20 in his pocket and the realization that after seeing the Grand Canyon, Northern Lights and redwood forests, he had no intention of parking himself in an office doing other people's taxes for a living.

Brune contemplated his options, including waiting tables, and lined up several interviews. The first one was with Greenpeace as a canvasser. Launched in 1971, Greenpeace is the international nonprofit dedicated to solving global environmental issues. Brune recalls, with obvious emotion, walking into the Greenpeace office. "It was complete chaos. There was a banner across the floor, people were walking around in their socks, protest signs blocked the door and volunteers were everywhere." He knew, even before his interview, he says, that joining the ranks of environmental changemakers was his life's calling. "It was a very powerful moment. The sun was shining in, harps were playing," he muses, dreamy eyed. Then laughs. "Not really. But I was thinking, wow, I can actually make the world a better place and pay my rent at the same time. Not a bad gig."

Brune plunged into environmental activism at Greenpeace with zeal. And the friendly, easygoing young man discovered his "dark side." It turns out Brune is a natural at what he calls one of most important skills for activists—the art and science of hard-hitting "creative confrontation." That, Brune says, means challenging corporate interests not out of hate, but out of the genuine desire to make them more responsive to the marketplace and the common good. Brune describes the tactics as being "hard on the issues, but soft on the people," although some of his early experiences with confrontation, during his Greenpeace years, ended up being a little hard on both.

Mary Brune, Mike Brune's wife, was dating him when he worked for Greenpeace and remembers more than one incident that ended in his arrest, including a nuclear testing protest at the Consulate General of France in San Francisco that Brune had invited her to witness.

During his four-year tenure at Greenpeace doing grassroots organizing and campaigning, Brune honed his skills and added to his repertoire of confrontational tactics. He employed similar tactics with cutthroat precision at RAN in 1999 as campaign manager of an international operation targeting Home Depot, the world's leading dealer and retailer of wood products. The tactics mixed guerrilla market activism with good old solo ingenuity. The goal? Get one of the logging industry's biggest clients, Home Depot, to renounce sourcing of wood products from old-growth virgin forests filled with ancient, never-harvested stands of very diverse trees. The strategy? Mobilize Home Depot's customers, environmental activists and the general public to protest the retail giant's wood-purchasing policies. Once Home Depot succumbed to this outcry, logging companies would have to listen, Brune and RAN theorized.

It was up to Brune to figure out how.

His campaign used an onslaught of market warfare to get the attention of Home Depot's corporate leadership, headquartered in Atlanta, Ga. Advertisements in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* portrayed top company executives by name and face as pinstriped-clad loggers cutting down forests. Schoolchildren around the world were urged to join a massive letter-writing effort, bombarding the big business with their plea, "All we want for Christmas is a healthy planet. Please stop logging old-growth forests." Hundreds of protests took place throughout the United States and Canada, and banners

were strung on Home Depot company headquarters buildings. Brune was ready to take the company to the mat, realizing all the while what a delicate balancing act he was orchestrating. “You can’t pull any punches. You have to expose, attack these CEOs and at the same time appeal to their better natures, their desire to leave a lasting legacy.” Tricky stuff, and, as Brune discovered, pressure from the outside was not quite getting the job done.

Then it hit him: Protest from the inside. A showdown in a Home Depot store in the heart of Atlanta proved pivotal. Having learned, in a way he chooses not to disclose, how to operate the store’s intercom system, Brune launched a one-man blitz. “Attention shoppers, on aisle 13 you will find wood ripped from the heart of the rainforest,” he announced over the loudspeaker, disappearing before workers could track him down. Another broadcast, “Attention shoppers. Aisle 10 features wood logged from Indonesia, destroying the lives of thousands of indigenous people.” Another dash across the store. “Attention shoppers. Thank you for buying ancient redwoods from California.”

In all Brune, managed five messages before a manager, fuming mad, caught him in the act. “I thought he was going to hit me, and he might have, but it was in front of a crowd,” Brune exults. Flummoxed, the manager shouted, “Why don’t you get a job!” “This is my job,” came Brune’s cool response. “I completely blew his mind.” The manager pressed on. “Why do you have to create chaos?!” Brune stood his ground, “Yes, why do I have to? Why do people have to string banners on headquarters buildings, risking their lives, to convince a company to do what is right?” he shot back.

The police arrived, rapidly ushering Brune out of the store. Although he was not arrested, this time, he was banned from any Home Depot in Georgia. But not before, Brune says, the manager whispered a final, shocking sentiment in his ear: “I really support what you’re doing. If there is anything I can do to help, let me know.” It was Brune’s turn to have his mind blown.

Not long after Brune’s assault, with protest pressures taking their toll, Home Depot changed its policies, ending the purchase and sale of wood products from old-growth forests. *Time* magazine dubbed the corporate turnaround the top environmental story of 1999. Home Depot executives claimed, however, the company’s about-face was not a capitulation to the activities of any extreme group.

Yeah, right, says Brune.

There was no doubt that Brune, serving as RAN campaign director from 2000–2002, was at the top of his game. He relished the agitation, the civil disobedience and the edgy market-based tactics. “I fell in love with this work,” he says. And he loved destroying corporate perceptions of environmental activists.

During a particularly nasty campaign against Boise Cascade, the wood products manufacturing giant fired off letters to RAN’s financial contributors accusing them of supporting “an anti-business, anti-American, illegal, immoral bunch of San Francisco commie pinko tree-hugging hippie freaks.” One of RAN’s sponsors reacted by thanking BC for the feedback and doubling donations to the nonprofit.

The grand irony, according to RAN board member Jim Gollin, is that when many CEOs expect hippies with horns to face them in tough negotiations, Brune’s clean-cut, “meatloaf and milkshake” Middle-American charm always throws them for a loop. “He looks like someone they would want to hire,” he says with a chuckle. And Brune was someone the board wanted to elevate when the executive director position opened up in RAN headquarters in 2002. But board members soon discovered it wasn’t going to be easy.

“Mike loved being a campaigner, being at the pointy end of the spear,” says Gollin. Board member Jodie Evans echoes the frustration they faced pushing Brune into the top spot. “It took a year to talk him into it,” she says. “He was so happy, and he really rocked as campaign director.” Brune finally surrendered to the inevitable, took the reins of leadership and promptly stunned the board with his first plan of action. He wanted to

reenergize RAN's ongoing challenge to the old-growth forest logging investments of one of the world's largest financial institutions, Citi. "We thought he was crazy," says Evans.

Brune laid out a "kitchen sink" campaign, vowing to throw everything at Citi. RAN staff and volunteers bird-dogged company execs at speaking engagements, pressing them from the audience on the issues; shareholder resolutions were drafted and submitted to the Citi board; and RAN called upon the celebrity factor, using such well-known names as Susan Sarandon in paid advertisements. "The campaign he laid out was brilliant, brilliant," says Evans.

In fact, brilliant, ferocious, and mild mannered are all words Evans uses to describe Brune. It is these traits, she says, that are key to his effective confrontations with corporate bigwigs. "These guys aren't used to people like him. He has them by the tail, but he is such a squirt." But always a respectful squirt.

Just ask Joe Lucas, director of the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity. Lucas engaged Brune, author of *Coming Clean: Breaking America's Addiction to Oil and Coal*, in a contentious *Democracy Now!* debate on the future of clean coal, which was broadcast from studios in different cities. Both Brune and Lucas were firm in their facts and unshakeable in their convictions on the clean coal issue. Their debate was acrimonious to say the least. When Brune later traveled to Washington, D.C., however, he invited Lucas out for a drink, completely catching the clean coal advocate off guard. It's understandable Lucas would be surprised because they share no common ground on the clean coal subject, which didn't, Lucas thought, leave much room for pleasant conversation. He soon discovered he was wrong. "Brune's aggressive campaign against clean coal is regrettable," says Lucas. "We have fundamental differences in how we view the issue, but Mike is very thoughtful, very human. We have committed to stay in touch."

It is not surprising that associations and corporations advocating energy and environmental policies Brune soundly disputes criticize RAN's brand of confrontational market activism and stands on the issues. RAN has faced off against such targets as Burger King, Mitsubishi and General Mills in a dogged effort to "persuade" these corporate biggies to adopt environmentally friendly practices.

What is surprising, however, is RAN's very vocal critic from the environmental side of the table. Glen Barry, Ph.D., an ecologist and writer who runs Ecological Internet, expresses frustration with what he contends is RAN's abandonment of its core values, which he times from Brune's reign. EI claims to be "Home of the Earth's largest and most used environmental Web portals, including the world's first blog and ecological search engines." The Web-based resource advocates complete cessation of industrial activities in ancient woodlands and targets environmental groups, governments and industries pursuing certification of "sustainable forestry" in old growth forests.

Barry, a knowledgeable and indefatigable advocate of rainforest preservation, accuses RAN and Brune of easy compromises with environmental foes and faults both for an agenda that he believes has strayed off track with activism geared toward coal and tar sands mining. One of his biggest beefs is with RAN's alignment with the nonprofit Forest Stewardship Council's sustainable forestry certification process. The process is a labeling practice assuring consumers their wood products are from forests "managed to meet social, economic and ecological needs of present and future generations."

Barry believes the process is flawed, beholden to logging-industry interests and exposes millions of acres of rainforest to exploitation and destruction. As far as Barry is concerned, the FSC is engaged in deceptive "greenwashing" of forestry practices, and he has issued the following challenge to Brune: "Stop lending RAN's name and support to the FSC." He stands ready and willing to debate Brune on this issue.

Brune doesn't dispute the expanding focus of RAN's mission. "Climate change—triggered in large part by fossil fuel combustion—is the greatest threat to rainforests around the world. And rainforest preservation is critical to fighting global warming," he says, advocating an approach that addresses both climate change and rain-forest preservation from various angles. Brune acknowledges the need for ongoing evaluation

of the FSC's sustainability standards and asserts he would rather work with Barry against common foes than suffer Barry's attacks.

When it comes to corporate adversaries, his primary focus, Brune is not unlike the black panther gracing RAN's Web site—relentless in pursuit, graceful in attack. Because he plants his organization deep in the middle of public debate, governmental lawmaking and billion-dollar business decisions, Brune is well aware his activism is subject to scrutiny. As to his detractors, he shrugs. Opposition, in all its forms, comes with the territory, he says.

Maybe Brune can afford to be so philosophical about the agitations and battles on the global environmental stage because he knows he has the perfect retreat waiting at home with his wife and young children. Having grown up in a quintessential all-American community in Toms River, small-town living resonates with Brune. And tooling around the neighborhood, his family snuggled in the Prius, he sees the potential for a greener future everywhere he looks. And the future fills him with hope as powerful as the exhilaration he feels when corporate America fundamentally shifts the way it does business in response to RAN's campaigns.

Caring father, dreaded ruckus-raiser, appreciative son, published author, dynamite leader of one of the world's most respected (and resented) nonprofits, Brune manages to blend all these roles with modesty, fierce discipline and fervent optimism.

And he has no qualms about using his own children to make a point.

Shortly after his wife became pregnant with their first child, daughter Olivia, Brune plugged an ultrasound picture into a slide presentation for a hostile logging convention audience. Needless to say, his message about the dangers of decimating old growth forests met with cold, stony silence. As he drew to a close, he faced the crowd. "If you choose not to work with us, there is one thing you must consider," he sternly warned the expectant group, bringing up his last slide—Olivia's ultrasound—on the screen, "We're breeding."

Full Photo Digital Version: <http://www.pageturnpro.com/Alameda-Magazine/6387-Oakland-Magazine-July-2009/index.html#52>

<http://www.alamedamagazine.com/media/Alameda-Magazine/July-August-2009/Speak-Softly-and-Carry-a-Big-Green-Stick/#comments>