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TOP NEWS

By Pallavi Gogoi

Wal-Mart's Jim and Laura: The Real Story

The bloggers backing the big retailer are not fake people, but real fans. However, Wal-Mart is paying plenty for their support

On Sept. 27, 2006, a folksy blog called Wal-Marting Across America was born. It features the journey of Laura and Jim, a couple on their maiden trip in an RV (recreational vehicle), capturing lives and stories as they journey from Las Vegas to Georgia, and park for free at Wal-Mart Stores ([WMT](#)) parking lots. Laura's first blog post features a black-and-white photograph and humbly says: "We are not bloggers, but since our lives have always been more journey than destination we are explorers at heart.... We figured we'd give it a go." Every Wal-Mart employee that Laura and Jim run into, from store clerks to photogenic executives, absolutely loves to work at the store.

Sound like a great Wal-Mart publicity campaign? Anyone familiar with Wal-Mart and its reputation for being quite stingy with wages and benefits will roll their eyes at such a rosy picture. In fact, some critics are so skeptical that they wonder whether Jim and Laura are real or whether they were concocted at the company's headquarters in Bentonville, Ark. "Wal-Mart has hired fake people," says Jonathan Rees, a labor historian and associate professor at Colorado State University at Pueblo, who has also worked as a staff researcher at the AFL-CIO. In a blog posting for the Web site The Writing On the Wal, Reese published an open letter to Laura and Jim challenging them to reveal themselves and asking who paid for their RV and gas.

MIXED MESSAGES. The skepticism of folks like Rees has been fueled by Wal-Mart's at times conflicting stances on issues. For example, Wal-Mart recently fought hard against a Chicago city ordinance that would raise the minimum wage to \$10 by 2010, and threatened to sue if the ordinance went into effect. At the same time, it has claimed that the average wage for its employees is \$10.11. "Why fight an ordinance that proposes less than what your average wage is? It clearly raises the question of what the wage structure at Wal-Mart really is," says Reverend David Schilling, director of global corporate accountability at the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, which represents 275 institutional investors and \$115 billion in assets. Many of the religious investing groups that Schilling represents won't buy Wal-Mart stock for their portfolios because of its questionable practices. Another example of Wal-Mart's conflicting policies: Although the retailer says it offers health-care benefits to a majority of its employees, it fought long and hard against a Maryland law that would have required nongovernment employers with more than 10,000 workers to spend at least 8% of their payroll on health benefits.

THE FACTS. So are Laura and Jim real people? Or part of an elaborate publicity stunt? It turns out they are for real. However, their story, told in full, with certain financial

payments disclosed, does not reflect as well on Wal-Mart as perhaps the company would like. The tale of how they started the blog reveals how hungry Wal-Mart is to find people who have anything positive to say about the company. And little wonder. Seemingly every week Wal-Mart is being attacked by politicians, union leaders, workers, or community groups over its pay and benefits or rapacious expansion.

Here is the story behind Wal-Marting Across America: Jim, 58, and Laura, 42, aren't married, but they have been living together for eight years in Washington, D.C. Between them, they have three children. Jim wouldn't reveal his last name or his identity. He says he wants to protect his employer. He would only say that he's a professional photographer. Laura is Laura St. Claire, a freelance writer who works with the Treasury Dept. She spoke at length with BusinessWeek.com from the RV on the way to Memphis.

Laura says that while hiking in the Grand Canyon in February they hit on the idea of driving around in an RV and happened on a Wal-Mart store with a parking lot full of the vehicles. "We thought there was a convention going on there, but soon found out that Wal-Mart lets RVers park for free," says Laura. The couple thought it was a great idea to rent an RV and visit their children, one attending college in Pennsylvania, another in North Carolina, and save money by parking for free at Wal-Mart stores. Laura figured that she could also write about her experiences for a publication that caters to RVers. But the couple decided to get permission from Working Families for Wal-Mart, an organization that Laura, a Wal-Mart shopper, signed up for to show her support. It was a perfect opportunity for Wal-Mart. Working Families for Wal-Mart is an organization that was formed in December by Wal-Mart's public relations firm, Edelman. It was formed to counter criticism from union-funded groups such as Wal-Mart Watch and Wake Up Wal-Mart. Working Families decided to sponsor the couple's entire trip, although that meant a change in the itinerary from the short Pennsylvania/North Carolina trip to something more grand. The group paid to fly the couple to Las Vegas, where a mint-green RV would be waiting for them, emblazoned with the Working Families for Wal-Mart logo. From there they would drive across country to Georgia and call the trip Wal-Marting Across America.

RELENTLESSLY UPBEAT. It was a great way to redefine the term Wal-Marting, which is mostly used pejoratively to mean, among other things, how big box retailers mow down small businesses. "We were planning a trip on our own dime, and we were thrilled to have a sponsor who would do all our legwork," says Laura. The group would pick up all the gas tabs, set up a blog site, and pay Laura a freelance fee for her entries. Wal-Mart says it's the prime benefactor of Working Families, but won't say how much it has given the organization.

Laura's entries look like a roll call of happy Wal-Mart workers paraded for the blog: One of them from the stop at Amarillo, Tex., reads: "Cragg Thompson joined the Wal-Mart team six years ago...Cragg's son, Brandon, contracted cardiomyopathy—a serious disease in which the heart muscle becomes inflamed and does not work as well as it should because of a viral infection. This necessitated expensive surgery and a pacemaker

totaling over \$300,000 in medical bills, paid for by Cragg's Wal-Mart Blue Cross Blue Shield Insurance. Today, 19-year-old Brandon Thompson has returned to work in the automotive department of the Pampa, Texas, Wal-Mart. Cragg feels his Wal-Mart's health insurance is a life saver...literally." Felicia Saenz, who began her career nine years ago as a cashier, is an employee in Wal-Mart's Bentonville headquarters. The blog entry, titled "From Cashier to Manager," reads: "Now Felicia is a Project Manager for Corporate Strategy/Sustainability and is very proud of Wal-Mart's efforts to protect the environment.... Wal-Mart is working toward an energy use goal of 100% renewable resources; targeting zero waste from packaging by 2025 and selling products that are good for the world."

CORPORATE OUTREACH. While there is a Working Families banner on the Web site, nowhere does it mention that Wal-Mart has paid for the flight, the RV, the gas, and the blog entries. Jonathan Rees believes that such blogs are misleading. "They pay an unspecified sum to these people to say how great Wal-Mart is—I think it is deceptive." It is well-known that Wal-Mart has bulked up on its public relations. Lately, the company has been working aggressively with PR firm Edelman to influence public opinion by going beyond mainstream newspapers and magazines and reaching out to new media and the influential world of bloggers. The company provides exclusive bits of news and even suggests blogging topics. Laura says she doesn't feel like she's misleading anyone. In the week that they've been traveling, Laura also found it refreshing that she didn't run into a single disgruntled employee in the many Wal-Mart stops that she has made. "We have not experienced one negative comment, and it's amazed us," she says. The blog ended on Sunday, Oct. 8, when the couple drove into an undisclosed location in Georgia.

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