

WHY ARE YOU HERE?

INTERVIEWS BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

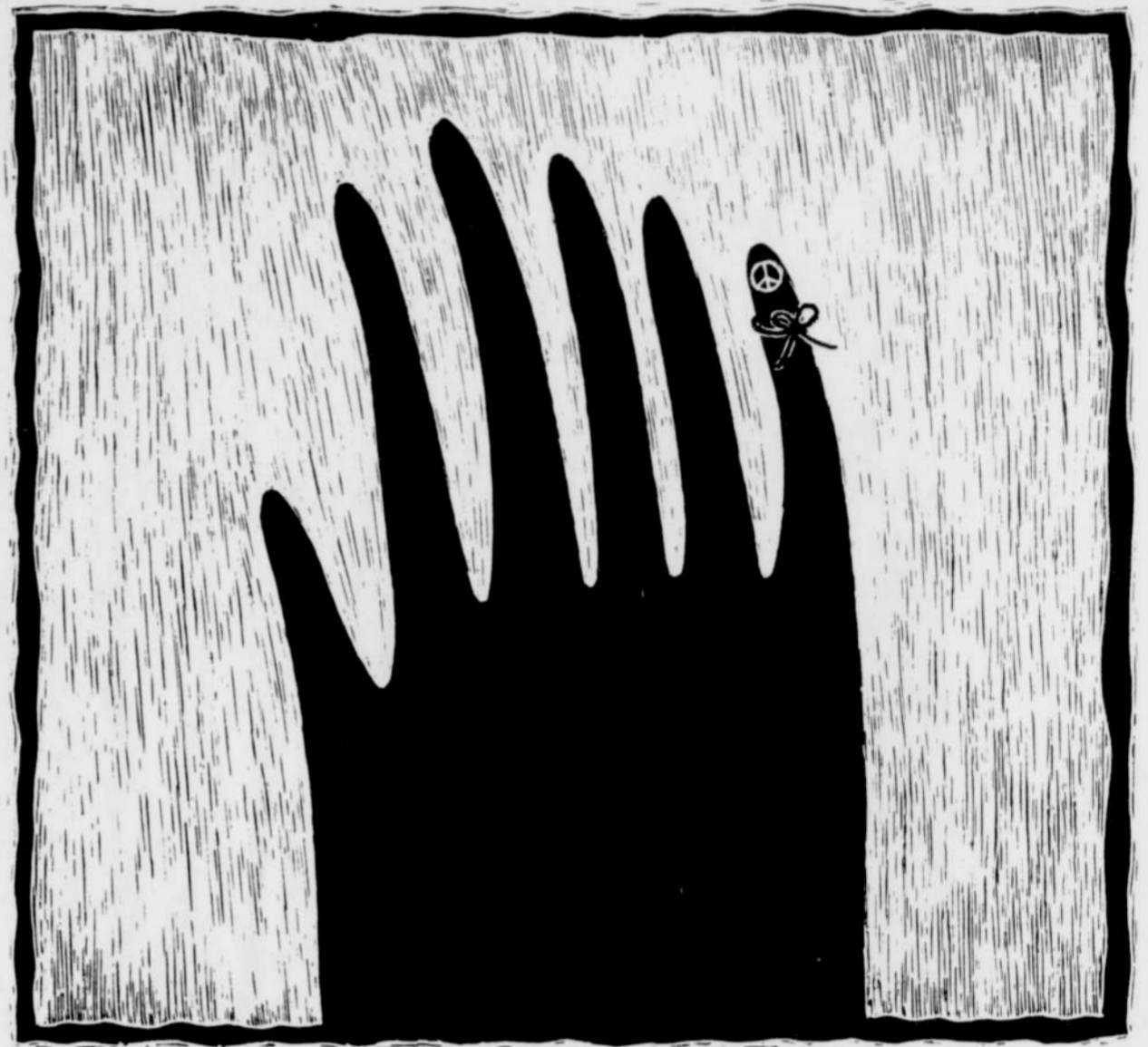
The Friday evening peace gathering at the Astoria Post Office is a year old on February 7. Every Friday at 5 p.m., no matter the weather, men, women and children arrive on the tree shrouded lawn outside the post office and hold up signs to wave at the surge of home-from-work traffic rounding the curves at the junction of Marine Drive and Commercial Street. Handlettered on large pieces of carboard or slabs of wood are messages such as *No More War*, *No Blood for Oil*, *War Veterans for Peace*, *When the People Lead the Leaders Follow*.

The group stands along the curb for generally an hour. Cars in the heavy traffic stream honk in approval, drivers and passengers shout heartily for and against the picketers, and a few make obscene gestures in disapproval.

Every week opposite the peace group on a concrete island where Marine Drive both splits and rejoins, a small group clutches large American flags and hold signs that say *Give War a Chance*, *Terrorists Don't Hug* and *Let's Roll*. This is the 'war party' that began to appear last August.

"Megan Casebourn and I witnessed for peace the first time the first Friday in February last year," Sue Skinner says of the peace assembly's origin. "I think that was the last time it was only just us. After that people kept showing up. Sometimes we have 20, sometimes 50. Nothing has really been organized. There have been people who wanted to organize it, to make it more uniform or create an hierarchy. But by it's very spontaneous nature it resists organization."

Friday, January 17, a day before hundreds of thousands protested all over the world against an American invasion of Iraq, a few of about 30 who appeared at the peace gathering that evening were asked two questions: "Why are you here?" and "How often do you come?"



ROXANA VILLA

SUE SKINNER

An hour a week at the Peace Gathering keeps me hopeful and builds my courage. I feel the power there, and know the truth of Margaret Mead's thought: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

The corporate death machine is tightening down on our world, strangling the hope of democracy. Endless war lines the pockets of the global robber barons and kills and impoverishes all the people, other animals and plants as it poisons our planet. We, the people, have the obligation to get educated, to speak out and to act mindfully. We must move beyond our fear and hopelessness and speak truth to power. There is no time left for dithering.

We have the power if we choose to use it.

PAT LAVIS

I first joined the peace movement at the Post Office about 8 months ago and have been fairly regular trying to bring an awareness to the fact that there are alternative dispute resolutions other than war, the loss of lives and the infliction of pain on civilians.

As an American who deeply loves my country, I was saddened beyond words at the terrorist attack on the World Trade Towers and the violent, useless taking of human lives. My anger was one of support for retaliation until I began to sift through what information was available and realized that terrorism is like smoke and we've been trying to stamp it out all over the world for decades with no successful result.

It also became apparent that some Middle Eastern countries hold valuable resources that many nations would like to control, especially those that are influenced by well financed corporate lobbies, and that Iraq has a horrendous supply of oil. I also concede that Saddam Hussein is and has demonstrated the fact that he is an evil political leader who really does not deserve to be head of any government. Setting that aside, when you look at the potential cost that a war will have, it just doesn't seem justified at this time. Not looking at the dollar cost, which is up in the hundreds of millions, but the loss of lives and the infliction of pain of innocent civilians, I decided I wanted to bring an awareness so that we would let our political leaders know that we wanted our country's course of action to be thought out and for the best interest of the American people. War in and of itself has never served the best interest of any citizens. There are alternate ways to resolve conflict that should be explored and only when all else fails should war be considered an option.

For these reasons I advocate that Americans on both sides of the war issue open their minds in dialogue, as well should the leaders of the world, and that the United Nations fulfill its role in resolving conflict without the taking of human lives and the destruction of society.

DEBRA SEYMOUR

I'm here for the seven generations following me.
I'm here almost every week since these gatherings started last February.

LES ZIMMER

I don't think we have reason to go to war but I think that is the inclination unless we speak out. When the president says we, the American people, are getting impatient he's not talking about most Americans. I think we are acting like a scared bully. I think the move toward war is built on false premises.

I've heard that the fourth branch of government is the people, and I believe it.

This country is addicted to oil.

The reason I'm out here is to do something. I want to stand for people who are for peace. I have been out here five or six times.

KATHRYNE PATENAUDE

This my fourth time here.

I decided to stand up for what I believe in. I don't want our kids to come back in body bags because of some issue G.W. has with Saddam Hussein because of his father. What are people thinking?

KATHERINE ANDERSON

I'm here because I feel so powerless to stop something I am so much against. I want to do something positive and try to be compassionate and live a peaceful life. That's why I'm here.

This is my second time.

DAVID SILVERCROW

The sign I had last time said "War is Stupid". We can't do this any more. War is not an option. I'm a vet for peace — I was not in Vietnam; I was drafted and spent my time in Alaska. I have been doing this twice now.

TOM DUNCAN

I'm here because I believe there is a better way to solve the world's problems than beating people to death.

I've been doing this regularly since last February

KERRY HAWLEY

I believe in the cause of peace and oppose war in every aspect. The Bush administration's stance on international policy — on Afghanistan and Iraq in particular — is unilateral aggression.

I have been here almost every week since February.

SARAH PATENAUDE

I'm here because war is wrong.

This is my second times.

NATALIE ORR

I'm here because I really disagree with war and what is happening is totally disagreeable. I am using my right as a citizen to protest and peacefully assemble.

I have been here two times.

MUSCHI MAYFLOWER

I have experience with what war is like being born in World War 2 and bombed in Germany. War is never the answer. Civilians suffer for ideology, which is never justified. After several thousand years thousand years, haven't we found a better way than war?

I've done this every week at least 50%, maybe 60% of the time since last February.

JANET DARCHER

I need to be here. Instead of 'get a life' I would like to keep the life I've got. And I think everybody wants to live.

This is my second time.

RON MAXTED

I feel all I can do is write letters to editors and stand on this corner, which is all my resources allow. I think if we can all stand here we can stop this massive war machine.

Our foreign policy is no longer a part of what our country stands for. Specifically, I'm speaking about what we are doing about Iraq. Our appearance there has been cruel. We've violated international law bombing and supporting sanctions that prevent rebuilding. Millions of Iraqis have died or are dying (since 1991). It's a diabolical plan engineered by only a few Americans and the rest of us don't know about it or have any control over it.

I've been here since I could no longer sit in my living room.

MARGARET THIERRY

This is one of those times to stand up and be counted, whether my opinion wins or loses.

I have been here four times and will continue to come.

DARREN ORANGE

Most of the time I drive by and honk in support.

I'm doing this in support of my community and brethren.

JEANETTE LORENZINI WILLIAMS

I was at the Post Office because I do not want the United States to bomb Iraq or anywhere. I don't want this war or any war. I'm here as a mother for my children and innocent children and other mothers.

I live and teach in Hood River and this is my first time at this gathering.

BOB WILLIAMS

I try to go on Fridays to our post office in Hood River. I think I can try to spend 1 hour a week standing up and being counted. Astoria has a great turnout and one out of every four cars honked at us against the war.

(He is husband of Jeanette, and also a teacher in Hood River.)

JESSI DUNKIN

I have taken part in the peace gatherings at the post office in part because my views on Iraq oppose my father's views, but mostly because I believe this can be peacefully settled if Bush would just get his head out of his butt and try.

I have done it 10 or 15 times. I went regularly throughout the summer, but then school started and I got involved with the school play, so I haven't had a chance in quite awhile.

MICHAEL MILLER (aka SASHA)

My presence has been inconsistent, due only to the fact I live in Seaside.

Why am I here? To support a voice of dissent, not a perfect voice but a necessary one. I do not fail to notice that while we enjoy the freedom to protest our president, the Iraqi people do not. Having a big mouth I treasure human liberties and feel deeply for the Iraqi people. But our foreign policy is hardly one that liberates people and for that matter, neither is our domestic policy.

I love democracy and would feel far more sympathetic if our nation did too, and brought Saddam Hussein to justice through the United Nations and not hypocritically. I mean, if the United States backs democracy, human rights and international law, should it not then support a world court? Should it not be willing to let its soldiers or citizens face war crimes charges when they've acted murderously?

So yes, I'm here to prevent an unjust war that will not bring justice. Our policy in the Middle East is so backward. Justice in U.S. policy there seems an improbable dream.

Saturday, January 18, 2003

We're sitting here in the coffee shop, deliciously dazed and terribly touched by the amazing peace procession we've just come from. There may have been 300 of us, from all walks of life, old and young and in between, most in black, some carrying babies, others leading dogs attired in black.

We walked today, in concert with massive international peace demonstrations, through downtown Astoria in a unified, somber, serpentine procession led by a large Mother Nature puppet and a woman in black leaning on a cane. At one point, we walked several blocks east on Commercial Street and then crossed over and headed back west. When those of us at the head of the procession had walked three blocks we looked across the street and were astonished to find ourselves mirrored on the other side, with yet another group still crossing the street. Seven solid blocks of people, three and four abreast, joined in peaceful but passionate dissent to "war" on Iraq! In our little Astoria! Feeling the warm embrace of so many, knowing similar scenes were unfolding at that very moment all around the world, many of us were moved to tears.

At the end back at the Community Store, several people asked "Will there be more demonstrations for peace?" and "What else can we do?" The answers are . yes, there will most likely be a need for more peace demonstrations, and every non-violent thing we can think up to stop the madness is what we must do.

We are all "organizers": put up posters for your event at Clatsop Community College and The Community Store, ask KMUN-FM to air your announcement and write a letter to the editors of local newspapers. For a downtown event, it's important to let the police know your intentions. If you're an artist, let your art reflect your heart. (See Noel Thomas' beautiful painting, *Collateral Damage* at the RiverSea Gallery for inspiration!)

Letters and calls to all representatives are absolutely necessary, as are letters to every publication you read. We must talk among ourselves, to the groups we're in and with our families.

Go to sites like BuzzFlash.com and follow their links to get news that's unavailable from standard U.S. media sources. (For example, when Iraq delivered the 14,000 pages of arms documentation to the United Nations, the U.S. took them and returned only 6,000 to the other members of the Security Council, citing reasons of "national security.") It's fun and exciting and the only way for democracy to flourish.

Action is the remedy to despair. If you're inspired, January 27 and February 15 are other days of international protest against the so-called "war."

February 7 we will have been vigiling for peace at the post office for a full year. No individual or organization is solely responsible for this vigil, as no organization or any one person made the peace procession happen. It's up to us all to create the events that will create the kind of world we want to live in.

~SANDY ELLWANGER & KATE O'NEAL