

Confronting Recruiting

Corvallis march finds common ground.

A Corvallis "Mothers Day of Peace" memorial march covered much more ground than the one mile between Cloverland Park and the National Guard Armory.

On Sunday afternoon, May 14, about 200 mothers and daughters, accompanied by fathers and sons, marched from Cloverland Park to the Armory on Kings Boulevard. They carried mock coffins and boots representing U.S. war dead and shoes representing Iraqi civilian casualties. The march and rally at the Armory was a memorial in the spirit of Julia Ward Howe's "Mothers Day Proclamation," sponsored by Corvallis Alternatives to War, Corvallis Vets for Peace, Faith in Action and Oregon WAND.

The focus of the memorial rally was to have been the war memorial for the soldiers of Bravo Company (2nd Battalion, 162nd Infantry) killed in wars since WWI. New blank

plaques have been added to accommodate those killed in Iraq. As marchers gathered, the caretaker for the memorial, Lester Whittle, objected to the gathering, feeling the families of those memorialized would see the rally as an insult. Whittle and a passing National Guard sergeant also objected to the message "Peace Is Possible" chalked on the pavement of the memorial. As verbal confrontations seethed on the side, the rally moved onto the lawn in front of the armory.

Corvallis activist Michelle Darr set the tone of the rally by reading Howe's "Proclamation," with the often paraphrased lines "We, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country, to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs." Oregon National Guard Sgt. Sara Martin spoke of the Guard misrepresenting its education benefits by advertising "100% Tuition Paid."

Although rally organizers Darr and retired veteran Leah Bolger had spoken to police and Guard representatives concerning plans for the rally, both organizations claimed they were surprised. At the request of the Guard, police moved the vigil off public property. Rally organizers decided not to make a fight over turf, and to pursue their original objectives from the sidewalk. This discipline, enhanced by training in non-violent civil disobedience, made the next 24 hours possible. The theme of the vigil was "Not one more death, not one more dollar." At nightfall, about two dozen demonstrators remained, alternating shifts to maintain the vigil throughout the night.

Discussions continued between Whittle, Guard officers, and rally organizers Darr, Bolger and Rebecca Michelson. Other participants occasionally joined in. Despite the rocky beginning, establishing common ground resulted in cordial relations. Whittle and some Guard members were invited to share a pancake breakfast prepared for the overnight vigilers (declined because they already had breakfast).

The theme for Monday was removal of the "100% Tuition Paid" billboard in front of the Armory. Seven activists from Corvallis and Eugene were committed to occupying the Armory to protest the sign. About 11 am, Maj. Chris Reese, executive officer for the battalion, invited the vigilers inside to discuss the company's recruiting practices. SFC Everett Horvath, Bravo Company recruiter, said Guard soldiers are first of all members of the community, and recruiting practices should be consistent with community values. He only wanted to enlist people who wanted to be in the Guard. Recruiters have to live with their recruits and when necessary fight alongside them.

Bolger, Darr and Michelson emphasized the misleading nature of the recruitment sign. Horvath responded that in the context of his recruiting process, the sign was accurate, but that he would replace it by Friday May 18. Darr gave an impassioned plea that "Not one more mother's child" should be recruited on the basis of false promises.

On Tuesday, the sign was changed to "Tuition \$4,500 + G.I. Bill." This marked the completion of a successful non-violent action that created bridges between two potentially contending elements in the Corvallis community. Corvallis activists are continuing a weekly vigil (Thursdays 3-4 pm) until the Guard stops targeting high school graduates.

I found this to be a remarkable experience. I was impressed by the dedication of the Corvallis leaders to nonviolent communication, the respect of the Guard for community sentiment, the willingness of both groups to talk and find common ground despite their obvious differences.

Michael Williams is a member of Eugene Friends Meeting, the national Tikun Community Leaders Steering Committee, and the Eugene Fellowship of Reconciliation Steering Committee.



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