

Petersen: ‘I think people were not scared to death, but they were concerned’

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But the threat then appeared real.

Petersen's husband, Gene, was the special events director at broadcaster KHQ in Spokane. Managers dreamed up the idea of having a traditional American family — mom, dad and two young kids — lock themselves into a concrete bomb shelter and tell listeners what it was like.

Petersen, originally from Tacoma, had survived polio at 5. She moved with her family to Spokane when young and graduated from Washington State University after studying home economics and English literature.

She was 22 and her husband was 25 when they began the adventure.

Telling the story 60 years later, Petersen is all smiles. But the deprivations weren't fun. The concrete bunker was erected in an urban shopping mall parking lot. It had one window — and listeners who learned its location would peer inside.

The room was about 10 feet by 10 feet. No one was allowed out for 14 days, although the door was opened once a night for Gene Petersen to empty trash. “He never got farther than two steps from the door,” she said. Even though they were early in their marriage and living in a modest rented house, they were aware of the minimal space. “It was pretty darned tight,” she said. “It was really a ‘culture shock.’”

The children, Laurie, 4, and son Dana, 1, had a playpen. A typewriter to write their radio scripts sat on a table. They huddled in sleeping bags and kept one corner for supplies. Another corner housed the chemical commode.

The concrete wasn't fully “cured,” which meant the walls sweated and the temperature could drop 40 degrees overnight. “It was colder than a well-digger's ass in that place,” Petersen said.

‘He lost his money’

Having little space to pack changes of clothes was rough. Bohemian Brewery provided water in containers marked for beer. But the biggest issue was food.

While they stocked tinned meat, powdered milk, peanut butter and crackers for the children — “the kids' food was not negotiable” — the couple only had a 14-day supply of colorless dextrose Christmas candy in cherry and strawberry flavors. This was supposed to provide

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Sharon Petersen

them with adequate calories.

They kept a strict division between their rations and what their youngsters ate. “We couldn't touch it,” she said. “We got so hungry we were almost sick of it and very cranky by about four or five days into things.”

During the planning phase, Gene Petersen shared his excitement with his wife, but not everything. “He said ‘It's a great PR thing,’ but didn't tell me I was going to broadcast,” she said.

Daily they would type a script and broadcast 11 times from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. after the radio station's news bulletins. “I got into my ‘radio announcer’ voice,” she recalled.

“Their ratings went through the attic. I think everyone in the Inland Empire was listening to us. Two gals said they put radios in their offices so they could listen.” Broadcasts reached Montana and San Francisco, and the station received fan mail. “We were like some kind of local heroes or something,” she said.

The concrete structure had one window. “There would be people knocking on the window — complete strangers and the president of the station came and looked in on us,” she said. “We used to pull the shade down when we went potty, and crank it open for air.”

When not broadcasting, the couple played cribbage and enjoyed bonding with the kids, who brought their coloring books. “We both took books, but never cracked them,” she said. Her daughter was assigned an important job. “She got to draw the X on the calendar for each day,” she said. “It had a heart at the end.”

They survived 14 days, despite the prediction of the manager. “He started a pool to see how quickly I ran out screaming,” Petersen laughed. “He lost his money!”

Fame was short-lived

The ending was bitter-sweet. At a celebratory party in the ballroom at Spokane's swanky Davenport Hotel, the other sales reps ran up a \$500 bar bill. Petersen has kept

the gushing thank-you letter from the station owner.

But such is the nature of the radio business that less than two weeks later, Gene Petersen's job was eliminated. “It's a cutthroat industry,” she said. The couple moved west where another radio station was gearing up for wide coverage of the 1962 Seattle World's Fair. They lived on Vashon Island. Her husband later worked briefly in Portland before getting out of the business.

A sales job with a company selling mining equipment took them to Denver. The four decades that followed reflected what Petersen calls “a see-saw life.” They had a third child, Kirsten. Her husband had a serious stroke, which led to years in care. Petersen's own career included a spell as an executive with Gillette, some small businesses and many years as a casino blackjack dealer.

They lost Laurie to an illness in her 40s; Gene Petersen died in 2011. Their two surviving children live in Colorado.

A friend from The Dalles had a family beach house in Seaview where she had visited over the years. That connection brought her to Ilwaco, where she has lived happily in the Surf Pines complex since 2015.

Reflections spur deeper thoughts about the serious direction life took in the United States during the Cold War. The Cuban missile crisis, likely the closest the world came to nuclear war, happened exactly one year after the Petersens' bunker stay.

During much of the 1950s, Petersen recalled a period of complacency. “Everybody was kind of mellow. The big deal was whether you were going to get a new car,” she said.

Then U.S.-Soviet tensions ramped up.

“It would be smart to get a shelter, but nobody was in a hurry to do it. It was the beginning of nuclear awareness. Even the bombs in World War II didn't bring it out, and they didn't use it in Korea, which probably shocked a lot of military people.”

The bunker stunt was a product of its era.

“I think the station was trying to promote an awareness, and reinforce how ill-prepared we are,” she said. “Spokane, Washington, seems a long way from ‘the action.’ I think people were not scared to death, but they were concerned.”



R.J. Marx/The Astorian

The city hopes to relocate the RVs and cars parked along Necanicum Drive between 10th and 11th avenues.

Homeless camp: ‘Not a permanent site’

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“This homeless neighborhood or your so-called pilot program does not belong in a residential area,” Veazey said. “The city placed it there and should be responsible for relocating it. Neighbors are finding needles, bedding, sleeping bags, tents, lean-to shacks, people living in motor homes, in motor vehicles throughout our beautiful city. ... What you have is a surefire suggestion: ‘Come to Seaside. Do what you darn well please, and there are no consequences.’”

Colleen Gould Gascoigne said she lives a “rock's throw away from the trailers.”

“I get to hear their conversations and their arguments lately,” Gould Gascoigne said. “Because I have chronic migraines, I don't sleep. I'm living with this day in, day out. When this started back in May, we did not get any kind of letters or anything from any of you saying that this could happen.”

The issue of RVs abandoned or left overnight — sometimes for weeks or months at a time — came before the City Council in April. Necanicum between First and 12th, residents said, had become a long-term parking area and a safety and health hazard for residents.

Police ticketed the cars along the roadside, and,

over the summer, many vehicles migrated across the street to a city-owned lot near Goodman Park.

The parking has grown to a dozen families, City Councilor Tita Montero said.

Their activity has disturbed the neighborhood and lowered property values, residents said.

“You want to take the property value of that whole section,” Tom Veazey said. “Not by a point, but by 10 points. You should be ashamed of yourselves, absolutely ashamed.”

The delivery of the petition coincided with conclusions from the city's homelessness think tank, a group seeking strategies to manage the growing homeless population.

Among the recommendations, the group advised establishing a managed car park to enable the city to comply with federal legal rulings and a state law related to homeless camping. “We cannot move people out of where they are camping and where they are residing in their cars if we don't have a place for them to go to,” Montero said.

Since the parking lot off Necanicum is already in use, the think tank advised the city to “acknowledge the reality” and enforce health and safety measures at the site.

Activist Seamus McVey, who serves on the think

tank, shared his own experience with homelessness, which he said began the day he left the military.

“I'm the person that everybody wants to kick out,” McVey said. “During my time being homeless, I've been spit on, assaulted and had garbage thrown at me. Not by other homeless people, by people who just didn't like the way I looked. If people don't deserve to live in a neighborhood, where do they deserve to live exactly?”

“We're all people,” McVey said. “You don't know how we got there. I'm lucky enough to be off the streets now. But I'll be hanged if I'm going to let somebody try to treat others in the position I was as filth and garbage not deserving of a place to lay down, not deserving of the basic human dignity and respect that we would all want for ourselves.”

The city's priority is to locate a car park or RV park somewhere within the region so people could move from the homeless camp, Mayor Jay Barber said.

“This is not a permanent site,” he said. “This is sitting on property that's there for construction purposes. One of the priorities that we're looking at is locating a permanent site that would be managed, hopefully by a nonprofit organization, that has experience in other cities. It also protects the rights of housed people.”

Waterline: City will continue monitoring

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The city will continue to monitor waterlines as the bad weather continues, but engineering staff said the transmission line is in good shape and the break has been fully repaired.

“There's vulnerabilities because of our geography, topography and our weather and our soil types, just like anywhere else in the state,” said Jeff Harrington, the city's public works director.

The transmission line dates from 1963 and sections in particularly prob-

lematic areas were examined in a resiliency study several years ago. The city expects to use a portion of pandemic-related stimulus money to address the pipe in these areas in the future.

Given the recent break, that area might be a spot they add to the list, Harrington said.

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Art Credit: “ik'anawaksho” by Audie Davis.

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