

# Arrested in the Fight for Civil Rights



Rev. Michael Ellick (left), Rabbi Debra Kolodny, and Rev. Barbara Nixon were among the Oregon faith leaders who were willing to get arrested for a cause in a series of civil disobedience actions against the federal Immigrant and Customs Enforcement office in Portland.

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er to be able to make that call.” Loose was a key organizer of the civil disobedience actions.

Kolodny, along with Rev. Michael Ellick and Rev. Barbara Nixon, would make up the first wave of faith leaders being arrested, starting Aug. 6, in what the group called the August of Action. The demonstrators went up to the door of the ICE Office on Southwest Macadam Avenue to deliver the letter, in person, to Godfrey. When there was no response, they linked arms with other demonstrators and blocked cars from being able to come or go. They then sat on the ground.

Rev. Nixon, who serves First United Methodist Church in Corvallis, had put her body on the line with her colleagues, despite significant joint problems. “I was quietly hoping that if they were going to arrest us, that it would happen sooner rather than later because it’s pretty tough sitting on the ground that way,” she recalled.

Within a matter of minutes, however, Homeland Security of-

ficers asked the faith leaders to leave. They refused, three times, and made it clear that they knew their actions were illegal. The three were put in handcuffs by federal police officers.

Reflecting on the use of such a public maneuver, Rev. Ellick, who previously lived in New York City for 18 years and was involved in the Occupy Wall Street protest in 2011, admits that getting arrested for a cause is not always effective.

“Civil disobedience doesn’t always make sense as a tactic. It’s a popular thing to do. It’s edgy. But we were really clear with ourselves this can’t be about catharsis,” he said. “In this instance, we felt helpless, frustrated, outraged and hurt by the country. And we narrowed in on a tactic.”

Though Rev. Ellick, Rabbi Kolodny, and Rev. Nixon were detained for less than two hours, and not brought into a jail cell during that time, the attention it brought to the issue was a success.

“It was symbolic pressure,” Rev. Ellick said. “And in our mind it, worked.”

By the end of the month, 30

faith leaders associated with the movement had been arrested—one of them twice. After the first couple of weeks of arrests, ICE starting to release the asylum seekers, but by the trickle. By the end of November, however, all 120 plus asylum seekers were out of the prison.

Werner said it’s hard to predict what’s next for the faith leaders with today’s political climate.

“We’re living in a time where a new policy could be handed down next month that’s even harsher or more inhumane, more unjust, than what we’re facing today. We’re finding great strength to keep pushing and to keep getting up and doing it even if next month might be harder,” he said.

Sarah Loose credited the group’s achievements to many organizations coming together, including St. Michael & All Angels Episcopal Church in northeast Portland, which provides office space support, ACLU Oregon, Innovation Law Lab, and others.

“We found our slice and went in there but the success of it as a whole was really because of that joint movement effort,” she said.

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--Martin Luther King, Jr.