

Nevada Test Site Oral History Project
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Interview with
Megan Rice

June 22, 2005
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Suzanne Becker

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[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disc 1.

Suzanne Becker: *State your name and when and where you were born.*

Megan Rice: My name is Megan Rice. I was born in Manhattan on January 31, 1930.

Did you grow up in Manhattan?

Basically, yes. We spent a few years in Connecticut, the first four or five, year-round, then we moved back to the city.

OK. And you moved back because of—

Well, it was easier to go to school and things like that. My father was in New York, in Manhattan, working.

What did he do?

He was an obstetrician and gynecologist, and he taught at NYU [New York University] for much of his life.

What was his name?

Frederick W. Rice.

And how about your mother?

My mother was—he was actually born in Maine but spent his whole life connected with New York hospitals. And she was Madeleine Newman Hooke Rice. She was born in Manhattan in 1903 and grew up in Bronxville but then went to college at Barnard, and then was married in 1925 and had three daughters. I'm the youngest. When we got a little bit older, she did her

master's at Columbia [University] in history, and then her doctorate at Columbia, so that's why we were living three minutes away at that time.

Right. Wow. What did she get her doctorate in?

It was in American history. Her dissertation was on the American Catholic Opinion on the Slavery Controversy. And it was one of the first studies that they claim as African-American history, which was nice.

Wow. That was fairly unusual at the time.

It was. It was early [1925]. But that generation of women, I think, Margaret Mead was in her class at Barnard, they were really *women*, and many of them became academic people.

Now, growing up with that, did that have an influence on you?

I'm sure it did. The more I think about it now, you realize how different—we just took it for granted at the time. But she was studying while we were going to elementary school.

What was that like, growing up in Manhattan at that time?

Well, it was a nice neighborhood, and it still is the same. Right next door to Barnard. That's the street where we were when we moved into that neighborhood in '37, September. Claremont Avenue borders Barnard, and 119th Street and 116th Street, all over there, so it was that neighborhood. We grew up with all those people. And that was how next door to us on the fourth floor in the other apartment was the Hecht family. Selig Hecht was a physicist then engaged in doing something very secretive. He couldn't even tell his wife. And that was the way we learned about it at age seven and eight.

So you knew about—that a neighbor was doing something—

We knew him. Right. But we also knew that he understood “the Einstein theory,” and so, what was “the Einstein theory?” *That* turned out to be something [he said] that hardly *anybody* in America understands. That was the way it was explained to me.

Right. Still don't.

Yes, so you thought of it as this big mystery. But he was a dear and kindly man. We loved him. He had one daughter named Maressa, and his wife; she [Maressa] was a good friend of my older sister. To end his story, we knew nothing about what was happening, and then the atom bomb was dropped in 1945. The next thing I heard in the early fifties was that he had written a book for high school students so they would understand the Einstein theory easily. And I remember seeing the book. It was a soft-covered book that was handled easily. Then the next thing I heard was that he had died. I'm not sure what it was of, but he asked to have his ashes sprinkled over the Pacific. So that's the end of this kindly gentleman who was our next-door neighbor.

[00:05:00] *And it turned out he was involved at the Manhattan Project?*

Right.

Which you knew nothing about, and nobody at that time in your neighborhood?

No. And it took—1960s and '70s, and especially early '80s, when the real awareness in the anti-nuclear movement was celebrated in New York. I was out of the country at the time. There was one time when I was home and I remember hearing them every few seconds doing the drumming outside the physics building, went on for days, for the number of people who had died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And that would happen yearly.

I'd like to go back for just a minute. You mentioned you had two sisters. What are their names?

The oldest was Alessandra Rice. She became a religious sister, like myself, after she went to Barnard for a year. Studied science and was teaching high school and then college biology, and

then she died very suddenly of Marfan's syndrome when she was thirty-seven. My other sister is fine and alive and well and is a grandmother of seven children, mother of five.

Wow. And what's her name?

Madeleine Newman Finnerty and they live around Syracuse [New York], outside of Syracuse.

[She has served as an occupational therapist in New York City and in the Veteran's Administration Hospital in Syracuse while raising five children.]

Now you spent most of your youth in Manhattan?

Yes, until I was seventeen.

OK, so you went to high school and—

Yes, near there. And grade school, too. Then I became a sister, actually when I was eighteen, because I was really very interested in Africa. I guess this is where my mother's influence [came in]. And my father, because he was also very interested in the social problems of New York during the Depression and very devoted to Franklin Roosevelt and Eleanor. There was a good crowd of people in that neighborhood who were very ecumenical. Through our elementary school we were exposed to the Catholic Conference of Christians and Jews, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and the Catholic Interracial Conference that my parents were well involved in, and especially The Catholic Worker movement. Dorothy Day was a good friend of theirs from the very beginning, from 1933. So that was always part of our awareness. And I can remember in the *Catholic Worker* newspaper in the early part of the war, like 1940, '41, '42, you'd be reading it, looking at it, and it was always a little bit above me, but these words like "pacifism" came in and I [thought], "what is this," and "voluntary poverty." My mother would give me some explanation, [but] it was always "a very controversial thing," this "pacifism," in those days.

So you were exposed to that fairly young.

Right. Right.

Did you have any initial thoughts on that when you figured it out?

Well, yes. The elementary school that I went to also was very much interested—it was a progressive school run by a person who was very involved in Columbia and Barnard for the Catholic, Roman Catholic students since the twenties, Father George B. Ford. He was also very community oriented and also involved in the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Union Theological Seminary, which were all within three blocks of this school. So he was anxious that the students, the children in that elementary school that he started in 1935—and that was the reason why we moved there, because of this school; it was a very experiential kind of teaching. He wanted to show that elementary school children could be exposed to issues. So he would take us to these meetings and we would have a class discussion on racism.

That's amazing.

Right. Or isolationism. I can remember those topics. And those who were attending [00:10:00] the meetings, like Langston Hughes, thought this was great. Then in our house, when kids would come, some of them were more racist than others depending on their families, so we would have these big arguments, especially about racism. So it became a good way of learning that and showing that it should be a theme in education.

What was it like then at that time as far as race and racism goes?

We had a lot of first-generation immigrants, especially Irish. But there were also Germans, so that came in. I can remember during the war when the German people had to be—there were problems with it. We had good neighbors who were at Columbia with a German immigrant wife. So we were very aware of discrimination in general. It was strong. Another way that we were

connected with that was through the Baroness [Catherine] de Hueck [Doherty] who was a Russian émigré of the Russian Revolution. She had come [to the U.S.] probably in the late twenties, and gradually was appalled by the poverty in New York and started a movement called Friendship House in Harlem. I can remember my mother brought us up there and we met her. [I was] nine. I can remember it very well, and her saying in this storefront, How would you like to have cockroaches this big under your bed to create relationships? Her workers, her volunteers who were like Catholic Workers also, they would do work in—I don't know, I'm not sure what kind of a thing was in this store, but maybe it was helping people with clothing or something. I'm not really sure of that. Then later they moved to Canada as "Madonna House." But I can remember many of their volunteers became [part of] interracial marriages, and I can remember my mother feeling so angry that people were disparaging about this. I remember her saying, I just can't wait until everybody in the world is tan! It was a very radical thing to do in those years. And then later, this house that we lived in, which was around the corner, on the corner of Riverside Drive, the Sheeds [Frank J. Sheed and Maisie Ward] who were British publishers and also refugees from England in, a sense. They opened their publishing house, Sheed & Ward, in New York, so they were there during the war years. They would come to our house and we would go to theirs. They would have gatherings of these Friendship House couples, and they were often interracial couples. They were kind of helping to educate them, and reflect together with them, on social issues and other things.

Now, as a kid, did you have a sense that these were fairly controversial, large [issues]?

Well, we were always on that side [of the victims, the minorities], because both my mother and father had such compassion, my father especially, for women, poor women. He was years at Bellevue as head of obstetrics, I think. So we were very conscious. And I can remember there

was a Communist bent, too, in there. One of his relatives coming down from Bangor, Maine, talking to him, and then going back to Bangor and saying, Do you know that Freddie Rice is a Communist? So they were a generation of very aware people, made aware by the social inequities of the times, of which there are still many now.

That's so amazing. Not everybody is aware.

No. And there would be others. Some from the Columbia faculty, especially Carlton Hayes, who was the head of the history department, and he and his wife Evelyn, they would mentor us in some way. He was consulted by Peter Maurin, who was the colleague of Dorothy [Day], and I guess you might say also they mentored in some way. They would go to those Friday night meetings and there would be, I think, a lot of consultation and mutual learning. It was an energy, and we caught that; all of us, over the years, because of the grave situations of poverty the Catholic Worker movement was grappling with.

That's pretty amazing.

Yes. And my one hope was to go to Africa because I said [to myself], well, there are plenty of teachers in [00:15:00] this country and we have given such terrible conditions of education to the people who are living here from Africa. Let me go and see. I at least would be some help there, more than in this country. So that was really my motivation. My sister has done lots of things around Syracuse, and her husband, with a big Unity Acre place. [It] is a home for a hundred wandering men that has succeeded very well.

So this is really instilled in your whole family?

Yes.

That's neat. Now, being as socially conscious and aware as you were, I'm assuming that you remember World War II and when the bombs were dropped. I'm wondering if you could talk

about that, what your recollections are as a kid. You were young but you were old enough, it seems, to probably have some conscious awareness.

Yeah, we had that mix. Because there was a lot of this from Roosevelt. I mean we thought wonders of him. Early on, we were doing things for the British soldiers before we went into the war, like we'd sell lemonade. And then a lot of refugee children came over and lived with families on our block, so we got to know them. I can remember the day we went into the war and it was—you had this very heavy heart. It seemed that World War I was *way* back in history and here we are, after all of these years, and it really wasn't all that long, I guess. But you felt it was ancient history, and we're getting into it again. And it was there, that mix of suspicion of the enemy, because of the way it was posed and propagandized, I'm sure. We had posters about Hitler, and of course that was not all that propagandizing, but it made you [aware]. We had these good friends that were German and we had these good friends who were blacklisted as Communists. None of us were really anti-American government. I mean we trusted. We thought it had to be, that it was just the last resort, though, you had that feeling. So there was never a suspicion of any of the stuff that came out later. Twenty, thirty years later, we began to realize the other side. It took a while. And I can remember when the atom bomb was dropped, we were up in camp in Maine. My mother wrote to us about coming out of the subway on 116th Street and seeing the daily news, "Atom Bomb Dropped on Japan." Her reaction was "thank Heavens." Her brother Walter "will not have to invade Japan." I mean all she thought about was that. No concept of anything more than that. And so it was still gradual. That was '45. We got into our troops coming back and that kind of stuff, and so you were no more questioning—I don't remember hearing about the evil effects of the atom bomb. You just felt that it ended the war. Until maybe the early fifties when I think it was sparked off by realizing that some of those

people like Einstein and Selig Hecht must've had questions. I didn't know the history of it. I was involved in learning to be an elementary school teacher and I wasn't thinking about politics, except knowing that people were discriminating against black people and those [kinds of matters]. But the war for me kind of petered away and it was a gradual thing later in the fifties, realizing the waste and everything.

So when did you develop an awareness?

It was my uncle whose name is Walter George, Walter G. Hooke, who volunteered as a Marine and was sent to the Pacific and eventually was sent in to lead or prepare for the [00:20:00] occupation force in Nagasaki. And so over the years he told us. I know many more details now. He married during the war, Caroline Small, out in California when he was home for one of his trainings in the Marines. They sort of eloped, in a sense, but we knew her and we loved her. She is a Quaker, so I think understanding her feelings and the two of them together—when we'd have conversations on my leaves from Africa. I had gone to Africa in '62, so I'd come back, first, every four years, and then it got [to be] three years. They were living on the West Coast most of that time, but there were times when we would get together and we realized that he had gotten himself very much involved with the nuclear vets. Some of them were already sick, and some of them were their wives—were already widows. And he was actually working for United Parcel [Service] in personnel. And he was very active on the West Coast in interracial relations for labor, unions, workers, César Chávez and those kind of people up and down the West Coast. But then he was also contacting these people who were affected by the bomb from Bikini. So we gradually learned about that. And the legislation, he was very involved in pushing [Ronald] Reagan to sign, kicking and screaming, as he always says, before the end of his term the legislation that would at least begin to give recognition, compensation for the Atomic Vets,

which is a very slow process. Well, he had known many that were dying. So he has a very wonderful history.

But in the late seventies I began to realize, from Africa, that very bad things were happening in Latin America, and the whole business of the buildup of the military and the treatment and the collusion with the dictators of Latin America and the containment. I guess my *really* big thing was being in 1980 in Calibar, Nigeria, when a Maryknoll sister was working with me on a project from East Africa, came down the stairs and she's saying, Two of our sisters have just been assassinated in El Salvador! That was December 1980, and we had already heard of Oscar Romero [Archbishop of San Salvador assassinated in 1980]. I relate it to that, because we also had sisters who were also being persecuted in many ways in Chile during the Allende time, our own sisters. So I was learning that and very aware, by gradually reading books like Penny Lernoux's. She was a journalist and lived in Latin America, but American, and she followed all the Maryknoll people who were affected by the governments, the right-wing governments and dictators and allies of the U.S. government. And so I read all of that. She wrote two very good books, *Cry of the People*, and I think the second one is *People of God*, in the late seventies and early eighties. And so I was filled with that. Then when I was in this country in the eighties they were beginning the protests in Manhattan, so I would attend those. In 1984 or so, we had on Good Friday, a walk across Manhattan. The first time, people were arrested at the Riverside Research Institute on 42nd Street, and we had Dan Berrigan and many others. I remember being just appalled that the police could carry these people out and arrest them. Two years later I was able to be there and I [00:25:00] was able to do that with them. So I began to get into the peace movement in New York in 1986. I was invited back to be somewhere in New York to be nearer my mother, who was living alone in her apartment. My

sister just asked me to be somewhere on the East Coast, but I ended up at the Catholic Worker in New York, and then in a similar little place in Harlem, helping in the community that was getting started, but being near my mother and looking out for her. So I was able at the same time to attend.

To become involved.

Yes. And got arrested with them, but we'd go to court and we'd be dismissed.

Right. So going through the motions, basically.

Right, and that was when I began coming here to the Nevada Test Site.

To Las Vegas?

Yes. [I] came here the first time for the anniversary of Dorothy Day, the tenth anniversary of her death, I think it was, or her ninetieth birthday; it might've been ninetieth birthday. And that was where I really saw and heard and listened to the input during the Holy Week. We did the whole Holy Week thing.

And that was your first time out at the test site as well?

Here. Right.

Now, I want to back up just a minute because I'd like to know more about—you said it was when you were seventeen or eighteen and you realized that you really wanted to go to Africa. How did you end up doing that? When did you end up doing that?

I was being taught by Sister Mary Laurentina Dalton, one especially, who had been our pioneer in Nigeria of the order that I joined which was the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus. They ran a school up on 140th Street and Riverside Drive. We all went there to high school.

OK, so this was from high school.

Yes, She was teaching us Latin, but we would always divert her to—she *loved* Nigeria. She had been in Calibar for just five years and then got sick, but she never really left it and knew a lot about it. And other women were being sent during the war, actually. They'd go by boat, and they would leave from that school. So we would send them off. And there was a magazine about education in both Nigeria and Ghana, and the first secondary schools were being opened by our nuns, and teacher training colleges. So that was attracting me. By the time I was a senior, I really wanted to get there as quickly as I could. My parents didn't object, even though I was young and uneducated. They had objected very much to—my older sister was four years older and she had only spent one year at Barnard so my mother was very disappointed. My father always nurtured it and fostered it. He was happy. They were good women. So I got educated as a sister in a variety of ways.

Meaning?

Well, I went to sort of normal school, I guess you'd call it, teacher training while I was being trained, got a certificate to be able to be an elementary school teacher. We also did some courses at our college, Rosemont College, and then we always went to school on Saturdays in New York. I was sent to New York to teach in Mount Vernon, where I taught third grade and then first grade.

And this was—

This would've been 1950, '51, '52. But I was taking courses on Saturday at Fordham [University] and in the summer at Villanova University, so it took a while to accumulate enough [credits]. I was always teaching. I never went full-time. It wasn't until '57 that I accumulated enough to graduate with a B.S. in Secondary School Biology. And then I went right in to get my master's in Boston College because they said in Nigeria, which has an English educational

system, they were being very superior about most American colleges; unless they were on the list of the top ten, they didn't even accept them. Partly it was they were independent in 1960 and it meant you had to have a higher salary because all the salaries were paid by the government. It was a way of screening. So I had a master's in order to be qualified as a graduate teacher when I got there, and it would help—the money from government salaries would help run the school.

And what did you do your work in?

Biology. Actually it was cellular biology and I used radioactive isotopes. I used autoradiography, [00:30:00] so I was learning the technique at Harvard Medical School for Boston College. But it was fun. I enjoyed the radiation biology I learned as part of it.

Yeah. So you had some background in that.

Yes. So that, again, would give me a better awareness, because it was tracing tracer elements.

But it was good.

And then from there, you went to Nigeria?

Right away, as soon as I got my master's, I was able to go that summer of 1962. Because I was also teaching in high school in Melrose, Massachusetts while going part-time to school.

You were teaching science?

Biology and math. Yes. And chemistry. But it was high school. Well, it was fresh in me because—

I don't think I could teach [those].

Well, I had to do it for the biology. It was a like a preliminary. Also I had to do physics, which I'd never really understood, but because it was a quick, concentrated dose—I hadn't had it in high school. Anyway, I was ready to be validated, and we were starting a brand new school in Nigeria in the east, but it was in from the coast in a very rural, *very* rural place where they had

never had many schools, let alone schools for girls at that time. We opened this school in 1961, so they were all really building the classrooms. We slept in a classroom, no electricity, no water on the compound.

A very different way of life.

Right, but it was good to experience that.

And so you basically taught girls?

Yes, all girls, boarding school at that time.

Was that unusual at that time?

No, that was the way it was done because girls, you had to really recruit. By the time they were ready for high school, they were *dying* to go. But to get them into elementary schools, because that was breaking the tradition, especially in the rural places, they used to have campaigns to recruit the girls. They used to call them convent schools, these little elementary schools that our order started. So there were little, we called them “bush schools,” all around, maybe fifty of them. We had a teacher training college in three other places, and the teachers from the teacher training college would take over these little rural schools. Our sisters were the supervisors, paid by the government to do that. They were like public schools but, you had to really nurture the local people to want to allow their children [to attend]. But that changed very quickly. By 1968, '69, they were already doing much more controlling, even appointments of teachers and that kind of stuff. There was a very rapid change in Nigeria from '60 to the present. They've gone through a terrific amount, very quickly, of rapid development.

How long were you in Nigeria that time?

Well, I was asked by my sister, in 1986, to look over my mother, so I spent four years, from '86 to '90, in the States, basically in New York. Then my mother—I actually moved in with her for

about two years—she decided she'd move out to my sister's house and we'd give up the apartment, which was getting too much. Then I went right back to Nigeria in 1990.

So you were there for quite some time.

Yes. And that was good. In New York, I was working with the homeless people. I mean I didn't have to work full-time. I did have a city job for a little while, till it was de-funded, in a city shelter. And then just visited voluntarily, I think, for a while, from my mother's house. We had groups with the men and I did some learning in AIDS [Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome]. It was pretty much the thing at that time in New York. Got involved in groups defending the homeless people who were being evicted—squatters, homesteaders—so there were good community, right-across-the-city people coming together for the homeless. They were the same people who were politically concerned about, whether it was nuclear or Latin America, Central America stuff.

[00:35:00] So I went back in '90, and this time I was sent to Ghana, to northern Ghana. Actually I had been working in Nigeria from '77 until '85 or '86 in religious education for the government, an ecumenical team of three people who went around giving workshops to teachers in all the high schools of the state, of which there were about, by this time, three hundred and sixty. They'd gone from ninety to three hundred and sixty.

Significant growth.

Yes, in like eight years. But this was when Nigeria was using its money for the people. It was before the bad dictators came in in '85, '86 when it declined. So when I went back to West Africa in 1990, I was appointed to a small diocese in northern Ghana. Well, not small, but a diocese in the very rural part, and worked with adult community leaders.

A little bit of a different aspect of the process.

Right. Yes. But I had taken a course in that. And that was until '96. Then I was going on leave and my sister asked me to stay for four months. Our mother was beginning to lose her memory then and I saw that [my sister] was having much more to do, and so I asked to just stay and help her. That was when I got involved in Syracuse. I mean I'd kept coming here whenever possible. But we did the School of the Americas action—1998 I was arrested with a group of people, twenty-five, and we did six months.

I was reading about that. And where—?

In Danbury Federal Prison Camp in Connecticut. And my sister was able to manage and she'd gotten more help, so in that way it was good.

So what was that like?

Well, it's a camp. It's not like a high security facility. And there were four of us SOA resisters together, which made it much less formidable. But it was a great eye-opener, great eye-opener, and we really learned a lot. We met wonderful people and we understood the prison system much better.

I'm sure.

Yes, and they too became aware. You felt there was a lot of awareness growing. And some of those people I still keep in touch with.

Then two years later, my mother had passed on. I was waiting to go back to Nigeria or Ghana and I did another action, just to show that the first one was what we should've done. I got with a group of ten in 1999 that went in. No, before I went in, it was actually June of 2000 that I went in for the second six months, but I had been staying at Jonah House with Phil Berrigan and Liz McAllister and all of those people for nine months, waiting to go back to Nigeria. Anyway, that was a great education and was totally nuclear oriented, nuclear weapons

And that was School of Americas?

Actually, for me it was. But I was living with them and doing their work, and they are dedicated to any antinuclear things. But they respected the fact that I had—I left them in order to go to that prison trial in June. I didn't want them to have to be caring for me because other people would, and they were already preparing for other actions that were much more serious. So that was good. And then right after that, I went back to Nigeria, in January of 2001.

OK. And you just came back?

I just came back in December, actually 2003 ending. I went into another new diocese in Bauchi State and again did the same work I'd been doing with adult leaders of little churches in communities.

Did you come back to—?

I came back sick, actually, with malaria and typhoid, bits of it, effects of it, shall we say. So that's why. I had finished the work, the project I was doing, and I had planned to probably leave anyway, but I left because of the illness.

And you came back to New York?

[00:40:00] New York City, right, and got treated. Then I did a sabbatical, and I just came from that; a whole great two semesters in Holy Names University in Cosmic Spirituality, creation stuff.

Where is that?

It's in Oakland, California.

Nice place to have a sabbatical.

Yes. It was wonderful. Great courses. And it updated me on the newer findings in biology and newer trends in cosmology.

Neat.

Yes. So I really appreciated it. We had very good teachers, and a good group of people, very international, also doing this as a sign of enrichment. It could be a master's program if people wanted to do a thesis. But I didn't do anything like that. I just enjoyed it.

Simply there for personal growth.

Right. And then I had already sort of hinted that maybe would they need a person here [Nevada Desert Experience, Las Vegas], and they said yes, definitely. Then I stayed a second semester. I was going to come in January, but I wanted to finish it because there were some things, topics that they hadn't covered. And so I am ready now to be here to help out with this event, [Nevada Desert Experience, August Desert Witness 2005], and whatever afterwards.

You first came out to the Las Vegas area, the test site, in the mid-eighties?

That's right.

And you came out because of your involvement with the group here?

Well, there were several reasons. By this time, I was very concerned about nuclear weapons. Actually, I had been in New York in 1980 when they had a huge anti-nuclear protest march. And we all did that. My mother did it, and lots of people. I just happened to be home at the time. We listened and met the *Hibakusha*, was it?

I think so.

And I also had a good friend whose husband had been one of the people, he was a physicist in the Navy at Bikini and died of a very serious problem, leukemia, very, very strangely. He was swimming around in the water [on the island]. His wife was a personal friend of both my sister and I, and their daughters—

Do you know his name?

His name was Bernard Quigley. His daughter became a journalist. She went to Columbia School of Journalism, his daughter Eileen Quigley. She wrote a wonderful article that got published in a journal, which I couldn't name, about the whole story of her father, as her thesis at Columbia.

She lives up in—I'd have to look up the address. But she would be a good person, and her little sister, both of them. And so that was another very close connection with—

So you've always had an awareness and a tie to this nuclear—to this whole movement, if you want to call it that.

Yes. Ongoing. Personal. Right. And my uncle is ninety-two and he's still at it. He puts on every letter, "Abolish nuclear weapons or be abolished." He's never stopped.

Yes, and he saw it firsthand.

Yes. Oh, yeah. He drove around Nagasaki. Within six weeks, he was given a Jeep because there wasn't enough work for them to do. He was in quartermaster stuff or something like that. He was beginning to be a lieutenant. He had entered as a private and they had gone to a training [but] the sergeants had everything in command, so they let—they just wanted to get rid of him because he wasn't needed. He took the opportunity and drove and got to know [Nagasaki], saw everything in his own time. And then when the Jesuit bishop of Nagasaki returned after doing national service in the mainland—he'll tell you this himself—he was the one that drove him around to the [Urakami] cathedral that had been bombed and his mother and sister had been killed. He became a close friend of theirs.

And so he really saw [things] firsthand and met people.

Yes. And brought a cross back that was OK, and is in a museum in Wilmington College Peace Center, Ohio; an actual bombed cross from that cathedral. They gave it to him.

So you've definitely had these connections.

Oh, yes. Right. Right.

What did you think the first time you came out here to Las Vegas and then went up to the test site?

[00:45:00] It was a very, shall we say, confirming awareness of what you'd been reading about or just hearing about. And the way the presentations were made. We had Louis Vitale and others, as well, and they gave splendid input each time on not only the history of the site but an awareness of what was happening in the planes and all of that. And we actually saw back then, we'd go on a weekday, I can remember being there, and a truck, a big, huge, articulated truck would be coming, carrying the components of the next underground [test], it was, I believe. It was continuing, despite the many actions.

Sure, the mid-eighties, it was still going on.

Right. And one of our actions, with Erik Thompson, I remember, we just knelt down in front of the truck and held it for fifteen minutes before they even did anything about it. They eventually just lifted us up and put us away. Then gradually the place evolved and they built the pen for people. I was present at one week, I can't remember what year it was, but it was a much broader event and there were five thousand people [joint action with American Peace Test March 12-20, 1988]. You probably know about that. We camped there [Peace Camp outside the NTS] for five nights or four nights, and so there was constant input all day. I was one of the people who was actually driving the rented vans up to Tonopah, where people were being brought up by buses and just dumped, so we would go up and bring them back.

Tell me about that. What was that like?

It was America Peace Test, was it? Was that the group?

Yes, American Peace Test.

And several others.

There were, I think, a whole bunch of groups that came together for that one.

Yes. It was in March, I believe, the end of March. It was bitterly cold at night, but the day would warm up. And we had powwows with the Shoshone people. You could select what you wanted to do. And at one point, twelve hundred people went over the line at once, and we were constantly trying to collect them from Tonopah, so I was on the volunteer team for that.

Right. Now, did you cross over the line?

Actually, I remember not doing it simply because I was one of those people, and I said, well, this year I'm not going to. I remember one man who came to celebrate his ninetieth birthday there, and his determination to be arrested, and he was. He was from Oregon. One of the first people to be put in prison in World War I as a conscientious objector.

Quite a history.

Yes, so you *really* met wonderful people at it. That was just very inspiring and awesome in the sense that there are so many good people, and the commitment to be there. And there was always very good relationships with the sheriffs and their people. There was never any Army or anything present. It was just well organized, the community and people, food—all shared for the whole time.

So there had to have been a lot of organization.

A lot of organization, yes.

And for the most part, it was fairly peaceful.

Very. Yes. It was almost hard to get arrested because they couldn't handle it.

I would imagine. That's a lot of people.

Some people did some backcountry stuff, but I don't remember that.

And so was that your first event that you went there for, or you were out there before that?

No, that was like in the mid—I mean I said I'm going to do this because I had gone to the Dorothy Day [event] and I think a Holy Week one, and my mother began going with us. She just loved it. And we have a wonderfully hospitable woman over here that put us all up, Helen Toland, in her house. She's just been very welcoming. You could have ten or twelve people there. Some of the people in my religious order came also, from Ireland, who had been in Africa with me, so they had an experience of it all together with my mother, and so we stayed there.

[00:50:00] *How did your mom become involved?*

She loved Dorothy Day. She was well, although she was up in her eighties at that point, maybe eighty-six, something like that, and strong. We had traveled. She had come to Nigeria three times and we had gone to Ireland twice. So I knew that she was able, and loved it. Very stimulated by it.

Did she stay out there?

She got arrested.

Really!

Oh, sure. I mean she loved going across the line with everybody and sitting there. That was one of her—she said those five years were the happiest she had had as a widow, and she was a widow for a long time.

That's great. Now, did she camp out there with you?

No, she didn't go to that.

She just went for the day.

Right, when we stayed at Helen Toland's. And sometimes we'd stay a few days afterwards because it was so nice, and visit the Valley of Fire.

Oh, it's beautiful. That's great. And at the time, was the cattle guard still there [at NTS]?

Oh, it was there.

They'd built the pens?

The pens gradually came in. I don't even think they were there when we had the five thousand, so it might've been a result of that.

Possibly. Yes.

And I was there again just before going back to Nigeria in 1990. May, I think it was. They had a kind of retreat for four hundred nuns in May, and that was a time when I really made a choice because—this was before I had gone to Danbury. But I had my ticket and everything to go back to Nigeria. And these four hundred were mostly new, but I was not new. I had been there many times. They were going to do the regular crossing over and going in to the pen. Then Louie [Vitale] said, *Let's do something special.* So about eight of us who had been there before got up at three o'clock in the morning, were driven out and then started walking in to Mercury through a back way. We tried to get there before sunrise; we just went as fast as we could, but eventually the sun began to rise. The helicopters were out because they knew there were a lot of nuns, mostly nuns. And so we just sat down and had a little ritual and waited. Then they came up, it was like a little cliff above Mercury, the parking space, and they came up with their guns and treated us as though we were terrible criminals. [They] put us in buses and we sat there for a while, probably till eight. Then we were taken to the pen with everybody else, and nothing more than that. We were hoping to put leaflets in the windows of the buses and cars of all the workers, that was our aim, before sunrise.

OK. And so you didn't quite make it.

No, we didn't make it.

Did you ever go in through the backcountry on the test site?

No, that was the only time.

That was it?

Yes.

Yeah. Wow. So how did you meet Louie [Vitale]?

From coming [to the NTS]. He was living here [in Las Vegas] in those years and he would always be a speaker. We attended some—with my mother. I remember on Good Friday there was a trial with him and that other brother [David Buer]. The two of them were tried on Good Friday for a fairly much more complicated action, and they had an amazing dialogue with the judge, Lloyd George I think his name was, if I remember. And he had been a driver of a plane—he was a Mormon bishop, I think, in reality, but he had been a driver of a plane in the Korean War, as Louie had been, and they both flew nuclear weapons. And so they were querying each other on how it felt, and Louie was explaining why he was feeling the way he was feeling now, why he did his action. It was well done. His [00:55:00] parents were both there in the [courtroom]. It was nice. It was good to be there. Then everybody stood up in the whole court when he was given, I think, community service. I don't think they were given jail time.

Did you have much interaction with any of the workers while you were out there?

Yes, we would. Friendly conversations. And we still do. And I notice the relationships are still very good. You see people hugging, they know them so well, they've returned so many times now.

Right. It's been a long-standing relationship at this point. And so it was fairly friendly.

Yes. Always.

And what kind of sense did you get from them?

Well, some couldn't understand us at all. Some felt that we were way-out people. And I must add that there have always been fine international people present with us, too. Young people from Germany especially, I remember, but other countries. One young man spent every day vigiling for I think the whole of Lent. I think maybe he was Dutch. So there has been a really good relationship built up. And I was also here the times when they did more serious actions and actually entered the buildings. You probably know about that, Erik Thompson and Steve Kelly.

Was that Louie also?

Yes, and Louie, I'm sure. He was nearly always at it. And a few others. Then we also had the people who were promoting, like the anti-resisters people who promoted the test site sometimes with us. We tried to be very friendly with them, too. I don't ever remember them being willing to have a conversation, or maybe I didn't put myself forward. Sometimes they were there.

They're a little more resistant to it.

Yes, trying to give the other opinion. And then I remember going to the Yucca Mountain hearings one day. All day long, people were testifying whether they wanted the storage or not. It seemed that most were complaining, but then there were some people who saw that it was important to do and to cooperate with the federal government. So we learned a lot about that, too, through the hearings. Sister Rosemary [Lynch], you felt that she really had a great knowledge of the history of the whole issue and had collected it. And we met some of those people who had been workers and then became parts of this community here. I can't remember the name of the man, there was one especially who had quite a position in the site [NTS] and then he realized. He was very much prominent here at gatherings.

I wonder who that is.

They would be able to tell you. I think he's died since, actually.

Did you have much interaction with the security folks that were out there?

Well, that's what I'm saying, that we would, and sometimes very nice. We'd invite them to our liturgies and they'd always say thank you, no. But we tried to always. Because we had on Easter Sunday—big celebration there, and Palm Sunday—for Christians it's big. And very creative things. We had a number of Biblical scholars speaking well, and some congressmen—there was one from Pennsylvania, I remember, who was some kind of a religious leader also. I don't remember whether he was going out of office or not, but he certainly was with us at it. And I can remember talking to him about the work of Seymour Melman. Have you heard of Seymour Melman at Columbia, and his alternative or conversion of the military industrial economy to something that would be more growthful in this country? He was a civil engineer. He just died last December. Anyway, I brought it up because in the late eighties there was a bill called, I think, HR 1111. A [01:00:00] congressman in New York City had introduced this bill that would make this legislation of their design that would show how companies or bases or whatever could gradually make a study, a real survey of the possibilities, and take five years. They would have to, under law. You've probably read some of that stuff.

A little bit.

But the possibility of creating an alternative economy from the military industrial complex just seems to have died out. And I can remember talking to that congressman from Pennsylvania at the site about it and he said, for one thing, the word "conversion" would have to be changed. The word "conversion" would put everybody off. I couldn't understand why they wouldn't be looking into that legislation back then and what it would've done to the economy.

Well, it's up there with a lot of questions about why we haven't done certain things.

Right. Right. Yes, just veered away.

Puzzling. For sure. So what about now? What's on your agenda now?

Well, I feel that it's very important that local people here benefit. I tend to be very idealistic and optimistic that we could invite people to be present at this three-day event [NDE August Desert Witness 2005], to think about the effect, the human effect on the Japanese people. I did hear and read their messages when they visited and I was very moved by their statements. I feel people should know that and hear about it, if for nothing else—especially young people—so that the message and the story will not be lost. But I don't know how that's going to be. But as well as people from everywhere else, from where they seem to be coming in big numbers. But it seems almost exclusive, especially the minority communities and youth, somehow if they could be attracted. And it's expensive this time. I don't remember it being so costly, but I suppose there always was a charge for it—has to be. It's going to be at the university [UNLV]. But if we could get all local communities participating—we had a good meeting with the Interfaith [Council] the other night, and hope their communities will participate.

Yes, you mentioned that last time. And so you think there will be more participation from interfaith communities?

I don't think we followed it up yet, but I'm hoping to speak personally [to them] and see what they could do or what they think would be a good choice to make about it. There still is time. That's one thing. So hopefully we'll be doing that. At least make a special invitation to them.

Well, you've got just an amazing history.

It's been in many ways privileged, I think. It's come by without my choice. I've sort of fallen heir to it. And I resonate.

Yes, but it's still pretty amazing.

Yes. Well, I'm grateful for it.

Any other moments or stories that we didn't talk about that stand out, that you feel are important to your story?

I guess just to add an emphasis on the awareness that you get when you're in the prison system and see the waste, the terrible human waste, and also the military training. It's almost—they're being treated like the Marine what-do-you-call-them, the people that start out to be into the Army or the Navy or—

The recruits?

There's a name for that phase—boot camp kind of a thing. So many of the employees are ex-military, especially in the county jail in Columbus, Georgia, which is so dominated by Fort Benning. And to see the cost in the lives of those women because of that terrible diversion of stuff, and the whole militarization of the town, the economy, and mentality. [01:05:00] [It] has been a great education. And they're the ones that experience it. I can remember one woman saying—she lives there and she said that these guys, they're programmed to kill while they're there and they're not deprogrammed when they release them. So it goes on in violence.

Do you see this militarization that kind of seeps out as linked to the larger issue of—well, you said our military buildup and representations of—

Yeah, absolutely. And the billions that have been given to it. I mean it's so much more elaborate than it needs to be, just the way they issue clothes. The clothes are surplus military trousers now, in the camps anyway, and I think it happens in the higher security places, too. So you know that there's a vast, excessive—I mean it was the anomaly in Columbus, Georgia and the propagandizing that goes on, the image making, the lack of truth in it all. Like when eight hundred people were arrested at Fort Benning for trying to close the School of the Americas. They brought them in, and yet they still wanted them to make a good impression on these people,

so they served meals; they ordered proper soup, mashed potatoes, meat and vegetables and dessert, for most of them. I just happened to be in the last part of it and I never even smelled it because they ran out of it after about seven hundred. They were fed on tables that were set up while they were being processed, because it took so many hours to process eight hundred people. Just excessive spending. And that has been the philosophy. Now we're so much in debt, and what we're not doing for the kind of people that live around Fort Benning—I mean the housing and the roads and everything else are decaying.

So there's money being pumped into that, but not necessarily going to the outside of that system. It's kind of really backwards.

The Pentagon has its limitless amounts of money and that's what causes the resistance, because people are benefiting so by it.

Right. Do you see the—I don't know how to say it—the idea that our whole nuclear buildup and the test site, are these two things linked at all, [in terms of the resources being linked]?

Well, certainly I suppose that the linkage, I'd say, the weak linkage is this Cold War theory that we had to build up and become *the* superpower, but I think that's only the cover, isn't it, to make an excuse for all this lobbying and all the contracts and all the civilians that are involved in it. I mean now like twenty thousand or more—they were saying on the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] last night, more than all the other countries that are involved in Iraq now, in numbers of [troops] they have only like twenty thousand at the most. There are more than twenty thousand paid mercenaries, serving in different ways, in fighting and security—under the guise of security. More than twenty thousand, getting paid far more than the soldiers and the Marines are getting. And so there's so much benefit. I mean it's all so overt. And the same way with out here [at the test site]. How many thousands are employed? Three thousand, and it used to be ten

thousand. So it has become the economy, a false economy. Totally false. So much other stuff has been neglected. And the human toll on all of those people who have to keep secrets from their wives for years and can't tell them where they're going [01:10:00] or what they're doing. Psychiatric problems and their family breakdown and all of that. I mean it's so evident and obvious, it's just really, very appalling. And how we are still till today, this very day, not mentioning the real nuclear powers when we pose the threat of nuclear buildup in some of these rogue countries. Never mentioning. And even talking in the BBC, the latest one that I was hearing within the last twenty-four hours about, you know, these people are not paying any attention to treaties. Everybody else is. But never a comment by these people who seem to be exposing other things and being quite open about their—

But for some reason, we leave this alone.

Yes. Right. NPR [National Public Radio]. Useless on that. I don't know why they're so—I mean it's so obvious. And this last nuclear non-proliferation treaty meeting that they were having in the month of May [2005]—it's *always* the U.S. But of course that's the bloc but the antagonism is growing, mounting, isn't it?

Yes. Yes. I don't want to cut you off, but I just want to put in a different CD.

Do you think we have to go more? Oh, I'm a little bit exhausted, I guess.

OK, that's fine. I certainly thank you for taking the time because it's wonderful and fascinating.

Well, I just honor this project that you're doing. It's so important. It's very heartening to me and will be to many others.

[01:12:26] End Track 2, Disc 1.

[End of interview]