

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

**Interview with**  
**David Buer**

**August 9, 2006**  
**Las Vegas, Nevada**

Interview Conducted By  
Suzanne Becker

© 2007 by UNLV Libraries

Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through recorded interviews conducted by an interviewer/researcher with an interviewee/narrator who possesses firsthand knowledge of historically significant events. The goal is to create an archive which adds relevant material to the existing historical record. Oral history recordings and transcripts are primary source material and do not represent the final, verified, or complete narrative of the events under discussion. Rather, oral history is a spoken remembrance or dialogue, reflecting the interviewee's memories, points of view and personal opinions about events in response to the interviewer's specific questions. Oral history interviews document each interviewee's personal engagement with the history in question. They are unique records, reflecting the particular meaning the interviewee draws from her/his individual life experience.

Produced by:

***The Nevada Test Site Oral History Project***

Departments of History and Sociology  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 89154-5020

Director and Editor

Mary Palevsky

Principal Investigators

Robert Futrell, Dept. of Sociology

Andrew Kirk, Dept. of History

The material in the *Nevada Test Site Oral History Project* archive is based upon work supported by the U.S. Dept. of Energy under award number DEFG52-03NV99203 and the U.S. Dept. of Education under award number P116Z040093.

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in these recordings and transcripts are those of project participants—oral history interviewees and/or oral history interviewers—and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Energy or the U.S. Department of Education.

## Interview with David Buer

August 9, 2006

Conducted by Suzanne Becker

### Table of Contents

Introduction: family background, birth (San Antonio, TX), raised with sense of social justice, sympathy toward the antiwar movement, education	1
Beginning of spiritual journey: travel to California and back to St. Louis (1975), becomes active in Roman Catholic Church	3
Work in Franciscan community in Chicago, IL involvement with Franciscan antinuclear movement, founding of NDE	5
Awareness of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and testing at the NTS	6
First visit to NTS and shutdown of Peace Camp (1989)	9
Trial of Father Louis Vitale and other NTS protesters	12
Participation in APT and NDE actions at the NTS (1990)	13
Importance of Franciscan presence in developing peaceful protest at NTS, and relationship of NDE to other antinuclear and peace groups	15
Work on staff of NDE (ca. 1994-1999) in organizing events, personal meanings surrounding protest actions, interactions with NTS security	17
Family feelings re: increased involvement with antinuclear activities	21
Work and dedication NDE mission over the years, and current involvement in migrant and homeless work (San Javier Mission, Tucson, AZ)	22
People who have worked with NDE over the years	23
Vision of NDE currently and in its continuing role in affecting people's lives	24
Role of the desert itself in the antinuclear mission	25
Reasons for longevity of NDE	27
Reflections on work with NDE, relations with NTS security, and benefit of NDE's continued presence at the NTS	28
Conclusion: final thoughts on working toward a nuclear-free world	31

## Interview with David Buer

August 9, 2006 in Las Vegas, Nevada

Conducted by Suzanne Becker

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

**Suzanne Becker:**     *Go ahead.*

**David Buer:**         My name is Brother David Buer. I'm a member of the Franciscan Community of the St. Barbara Province. My grandparents were all immigrants that came to this country from Croatia, Hungaria [Hungary], and Germany. They all arrived about a hundred years ago, and settled in the St. Louis, Missouri area, so all my aunts and uncles, all my first cousins, we were raised in Granite City, Illinois in the St. Louis area. My dad was drafted during the Korean War and was stationed at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, so that's why I was born in San Antonio, Texas, but I was actually raised in Granite City, Illinois. When I was in high school, we moved to West St. Louis County. My mom and dad are still there. They've been married fifty-four years.

          Growing up, we had a sense of social justice, mostly from my mother with the support of my father. Granite City is a very racist town, white. The fear was that the African-Americans of East St. Louis would come over to Granite City, so the N-word was used a lot when I was growing up, not in my immediate family but in my extended family; my mom would always confront it, so we had those battles. Martin Luther King was a hero in our house.

          So there was a sense of social justice, standing up for the oppressed, and also working for peace. We were Kennedy supporters, excited about the leadership of John Kennedy and then Robert Kennedy, and saddened by the assassinations of all of them and Martin Luther King also.

*I don't mean to interrupt but where did that sense of social justice, particularly from your mom, come from? What did that stem from?*

I think because [of] a loving family and the sense of trying to do what's right, be fair, have a just sense of community, and standing up for the fallen. There's a Croatian song that my grandma used to sing for me. It's about a poor little orphan, "I have no mother, I have no father, and need some help." I can remember when I was real small a beggar came to the front door of our house or to the yard and he says, Can you go in and get your mom and tell her there's a bum here who wants a couple of quarters? So I went in and Mom said, Well, I'm not going to give him money but I'll make a couple of sandwiches for him.

I remember Gandhi was appreciated. I remember seeing documentaries about Gandhi and that he was a strange person but very interesting person in his commitment to peace.

When the Vietnam War happened, I was of draftable age, and so that drew me into the reality of it but I had no idea of conscientious objection; my mom and dad were not social activists that way so we had no connection that way. When I was eligible for the draft, they were using the lottery system, by your birthdays. Well, when they drew the lottery, my birthday was number nine, so I thought I was going—because if you were one, you were going, 365 you're safe, right? Well, I was number nine, so I thought I was going. My mom was crying, but I was kind of resigned. Even though I was opposed to the war, I was resigned that I had to go. And I got a notice to show up for the physical, and there was about fifty of us and we all passed, and they said, Well, you'll be hearing from us, and then that's when Nixon ended the draft, so it was that close for me.

*That's very close! So that must've been a pretty overwhelming experience.*

You get a sense of being resigned to things. The world's out of my hands and my life is out of my hands and so I'm turning it over to somebody else. I went through that experience without having to do it.

I was sympathetic to the antiwar movement, although again I wasn't personally involved at all. But I can remember in my high school, when I moved from more conservative Granite City to a progressive, West St. Louis County, suburban high school system, we had some progressive teachers there. The day after Kent State happened, we talked about it in class. There was another professor that we had who was talking and he was sympathetic to those who had burnt down the ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps] building, I think at Washington U. [University] in St. Louis, so I remember that discussion, too. So it was heady times.

*And so that sounds like it maybe set the background—well, I guess you've always had the background to be thinking about social justice and social issues. Where did you go after high school?*

I went to a couple of years of college and then I worked in the St. Louis area. Then I went through a period where I was really searching: What's the meaning of life? Because I had got to the point where I was basically an agnostic, and I got to the point of saying, There's got to be more than just making a paycheck. So I took a duffle bag and a backpack and sixty-five bucks and hitchhiked out to California. This would've been in February of '75. And for me, what came out of that was the beginning of a spiritual journey, which led me to the Catholic Church. I was baptized Catholic but not raised Catholic. We would go to Mass on Easter and Christmas and weddings and that kind of thing, and I had some cousins that went to a Catholic school.

*What were you doing? What was your job at the time when you decided to leave?*

**[00:05:00]** Well, I had worked at McDonalds Hamburgers for a while, then I was a car salesman for a while—I had a lot of conscious qualms when I went into car sales. I was only a car salesman for about four months. I was twenty years old. So then it was after that when I left the car salesmanship and then I decided to go out to California.

*Where did you go?*

I went to San Diego not knowing anybody. Again, the key thing for me was this what's-the-meaning-of-life kind of thing, and I thought, Oh, I'll go to San Diego—it was February and I figured the further south I went into California, the warmer it would be. The first day I made it from St. Louis to Tulsa. The second day was very frustrating, I only got to Oklahoma City from Tulsa. I can point to the beginning of my spiritual journey as an adult from that moment. It was around midnight and it was like hardly any cars and it was wide open and very flat in Oklahoma and I was very frustrated. Well, God, if you're up there, I could sure use some help right now. Kind of from a very deep place. And about five minutes later a car that was going to Riverside, California stopped and picked me up. So I continued my journey to California and then down to San Diego.

When I got down to San Diego, I got a few odd jobs. Then one day I saw a guy, an older man at a beach house pulling weeds, and I asked if I could earn a few extra bucks and help him out, and he said yeah. So we started talking and he said, Well, my wife and I live in town. This is a house we've had for twenty-five years and we rent it out but it's empty right now, we want to do some renovation, and if you want to, you can stay in this house for free. Don't bring anybody in else off the beach. And I'll come in every day from my house and we'll work on putting in the patio and do some roofing work and stuff. So here I had a beach house which in 1975 was \$450 a month. The house is still there. I just saw it this past January. So it was the beginning of a spiritual journey. I began praying. I read through the Bible. It was like a hermitage experience for those several months that I was there.

And basically from that I went back to my hometown, moved into some very cheap housing that my extended family owned, and got a job with a farmer that was neighbors to my

godparents. They had a horseradish and corn farm, and so I did that seasonal work, and I just paid my rent up a year ahead. It was a real hermitage time. And that's when I read about St. Francis [of Assisi]—and again going to Mass regularly. And after about a year of going to Mass I felt drawn to join the Church and had my First Communion and First Confession and my Confirmation in my early twenties.

*So how did your family feel about that?*

As they saw the longer that it went along, the more supportive they were. When they saw that it had some roots to it, I think the more supportive they were. My mom is a spiritual person and she's Catholic but not always practicing, and my dad's more of an agnostic. But I had a lot of extended family members that were Catholic and they were very happy for me and supportive. And then reading about St. Francis, I met some Franciscans; I got invited to go up to Chicago, and I was in Chicago for about ten years, living in different Franciscan communities, and that's when I met Father Jerry Zawada, in 1979 up in a Franciscan community up there.

*Where did you live in Chicago, basically?*

The first year in the South Shore neighborhood, there was a friar community there, that was just for one year; then in Uptown where I met Father Jerry, and then one year in the Near Southwest Side, we had a house, and the last five years was on the West Side. We helped get a shelter going for the homeless.

*You were all over the city.*

Yeah, in a ten-eleven-year period, but all with the Franciscans, doing different things with the friars. So I was interested in joining the friars. I joined the secular Franciscans, which is like a laypersons' fraternity, but living with the friars and working with the friars. And there was one



friar especially, Father Phil Marquard, that I worked closely with the homeless. He was out of the downtown church, St. Peter's, a large Franciscan church in downtown Chicago, in the Loop.

So with St. Francis, one of the attractions is the great love of creation. I think all my life I have enjoyed being outside and playing under the clouds and the trees and animals. And I was attracted to the Catholic Worker movement also at that time. And it made sense to me—the horror of the nuclear bomb. And in the early eighties they opened up a peace museum in Chicago where the first display was a display of the artwork of the *Hibakusha*. I don't know if you ever saw that.

*I've seen the artwork.*

I think it had just been done and it was just touring the world at that time. This was very moving. And I remember reading the book *Hiroshima* by John Hersey and I remember I was volunteering, the friar community was in Uptown. I was walking down to the Lakeview neighborhood food pantry to volunteer, and I just remember reading the book, walking by [00:10:00] Wrigley Field during a day game and reading and you know the instantaneousness of the bomb, how just all of a sudden everything is just changed, and that could happen here.

*Boy, that must've been—had a lot of thoughts going through your head, being in the middle of Chicago thinking about that.*

Yes, it was very deep, it's a powerful book, a powerful little book. And so then I heard about—in I think it would be the late seventies or early eighties, before Nevada Desert Experience [NDE] began—there was a little group called the Franciscans in Nuclear Resistance. There were a lot of names of people I never knew, I came to know them years later, but they were people mostly based out of the West because Father Louis Vitale was Provincial at the time. And so they did this national little newsletter and started talking about gatherings at the [Nevada] test site [NTS].

And I come to find out, and as you've probably heard, Sister Rosemary Lynch and Sister Klaryta [Antoszewska] and Father Louie and a handful of others, they began in 1977 the presence out at the test site. So that's kind of the prehistory of Nevada Desert Experience.

*Right, the little nucleus that it seems to have sprung from.*

Exactly. And then the impetus was the worldwide celebration of the eight-hundredth birthday of St. Francis. And so from that, they began getting people from around the country and they began organizing. So I heard of it. I was aware of that, although I was living in Chicago at the time.

*When you were growing up, did you have an awareness of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Was that something that you had? I mean obviously you were, you know, conscious, you came to consciousness well after that had happened, but I'm just wondering if it's—*

I was aware of it but I don't think the horror of it. It was in my early development of my spiritual life is where the real kind of gut-level horror—

*Right. So you had an intellectual understanding of it.*

You know, reading the *Catholic Worker*— don't know if you've ever seen this or anybody has directed you to it—but right after the bomb was dropped, Dorothy Day in that next issue of the *Catholic Worker*, she had the horror of it. And while everybody else is jubilant and jumping for joy, she saw the horror of it. I read that, one of my first years in Chicago I came across articles like that and I was very moved by that argument and that perspective.

*Right. And so you mostly started to become more aware of it when you got to Chicago and became more involved with Catholic Worker?*

Yes, yes. And then Pope John Paul II visited Hiroshima in '81 or '82 and I was very aware when he did that and the statement he made. I don't have a copy of it now but I remember it's a very good statement about recognizing the gravity of that atomic bombing. Then there is the statement

of Pope Paul VI: This is a butchery. Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a butchery of untold magnitude. Very strong.

*It is very strong. Strong statement. So you're now, it sounds like you're in this place where you're in Chicago, you're aware of the folks on the West Coast and things that go on at the Nevada Test Site—?*

I was aware. In '87 they had the ninetieth birthday of Dorothy Day. She had already died but they had the first gathering and I was very aware. I would've loved to have gone but there was no way. At that time I took a one-year sabbatical in the midst of my ten, eleven years in Chicago. I went to the Catholic Worker farm in West Virginia. So I was there when they had this thing out on the West Coast.

*Did you know much about the test site prior to—?*

Well, I can tell you, I didn't know—having read about it and about the Peace Camp they had and everything, so I can remember very clearly my mental vision of what I thought it was. I envisioned a little two-lane dirt road, and somewhere off of this two-lane dirt road there was this little tent set up with maybe a little shack and that was the Peace Camp. So I actually saw it as something a little bit different. I was surprised at how close to the major highway it was. I was surprised at how close the gates were and the town of Mercury being there.

So when I first saw the test site was '89. So I came out here to join the Franciscans out here on the West Coast and I had my candidacy year here, so I was here from '89 to '90. So I came for a come-and-see for two weeks in June of 1989, and Father Louie was here, Father Alain Richard who you may have come across, his name, the French Franciscan who was living here, and I had known him from Chicago. He had been in Chicago before he came out West. So I met him as he was leaving Chicago and coming out West.

And so they took me out. They were excited to show me. At that time they had just put up the pens [holding areas for protestors who have crossed the boundary of the NTS] because they had discontinued sending people to Tonopah and Beatty by that time. And they had just done the action I think earlier that year where they had gone to the Mercury—they did the walk-in to Mercury.

*To the old chapel? Yeah, that's a great story.*

Yes. Exactly. So they were telling me about this, and actually one of the guys that was a part of that project was there with Louie and Alain telling the story as they were recollecting it. And we climbed up Pagoda Hill. I remember we climbed up Pagoda Hill together.

*Describe a little bit where that is.*

You know it's across the highway from the gate of the test site and it would be to the north, on the northern edge of where the Peace Camp had been set up, and they've got two large piles of [00:15:00] rocks up there. They were there already when I was there in '89, so sometime in the eighties probably they were built.

*So what were your first impressions, do you remember, when you got out there and you actually saw the test site?*

You know, very moved, and the Peace Camp was going on, and so all this was happening. The two weeks I was here was the time they were going to shut down the Peace Camp which had been ongoing there for several years, I think. And so I ended up going out there—I was there for the day that they tore it down. So I was interviewed on television and Louie and Alain invited me to be out there with them and I chose to be out there with the people. And we knew they were going to come. They had said, In twenty-four hours we're going to come in and take away the Peace Camp. And the issue was they were not going to recognize that they had to

ask permission to be there from BLM [Bureau of Land Management]. BLM said, Just ask for our permission, we'll give you permission. But out of principle they weren't because they said, This is Shoshone land and we have the Shoshone's permission to be here. So because of that, they didn't get the paperwork—

*And so it was the BLM that was coming in or it was the test site security? Wackenhut?*

Along with other authorities, so there were several levels of authority. State troopers were there. It was quite a procession that day when they came. They had flatbed trucks because they were going to haul away the trailers.

*Now, talk about Peace Camp a little bit because I don't know that it's actually been described on tape.*

Charlie Hilfenhaus would be the one, if you know Charlie, and I only got the tail end of it, but there were several trailers, again we're talking sixteen, seventeen years ago now but it was—

*And these were structures that were permanently or, you know, put on quasi-permanently on the land and it actually formed an encampment.*

Quasi-permanently, yeah. They had little pathways lined with rocks. They had a pet rattlesnake in one of the pits somewhere. I kept away from that. And they would have common meals together. And I think when I was there, there might've been six or eight people. We're pretty sure that a guy that came in on a motorcycle the night before was an undercover guy. So our final night there together was kind of, Let's keep an eye—

*A little subdued?*

Yeah, subdued and out of place, but probably he was just checking out to see if we were all peaceniks or what we were, which we were peaceniks. And I remember this beautiful full moon over the desert. And from what I was told by the stories there, people would always be coming

and going; and there was quite a network of people over the years. And I suppose, I don't know how well they were structured but I'm sure there were some people who took responsibility for bottom-lining things, to make sure there was a certain presence there, but I'm not sure how that was set up. Diana Hirschi is a woman out in Salt Lake City; she was involved with the Peace Camp. She's still around. A friend of hers came to this last August Desert Witness this past week.

So that was the camp. And then there were the Shadow Children. Now, whether they were there then or they had—I think they were already there, and so that was a hike you had to kind of know how to line it up with Pagoda Hill and find your way to find it, but it was quite moving to see that. I think they were there already but I'm not sure. It might've been later.

*No, I think they were there in '89.*

I think that's correct. That was quite moving to see. So you had the Peace Camp area, it was a smaller area where the people were actually staying, but then there was this extended area and you might have people who would set up tents a little bit more remote. And then even further out you have peace signs made out of white rocks that were found or pictures. Near the Shadow Children there were pictures of loved ones who'd been affected by testing put out on the rocks ceremoniously and lovingly, and people would leave their names and other mementos.

*Now the Shadow Children are gone, though.*

They are gone?

*I don't know.*

Well, I have seen them within the last several years.

*You have. OK.*

They're deteriorating. But if they're gone, that's news to me.

*Maybe they're just deteriorating. I didn't get out that far, so I don't know.*

There should be some remnants. Have you really tried to find them?

*I've only quasi-tried to find them because the times that I've been out there it's been getting to be towards sunset.*

Well, I suspect they're still there, so if you want to make an extra effort sometime—

*Or very early in the morning, and then we usually do the procession to the gates of—I'll try to do that—*

The last time I tried to find them, I found them, within the last several years.

*OK. Well, that's good to know. So that was your first trip out there, and then what—?*

Yes, and then I chose not to be arrested but they arrested four people. I was there two weeks in June, and then I came back in October and moved here. And then their trials were taking place, so I attended some of the trials of these people, as well as the trials for Father Louie and those who had been involved in the Mercury action. And I was present when the judge [in a Las Vegas courtroom] was somewhat moved by this whole presentation in his courtroom with Louie Vitale and when he said, will the accused arise, the whole courtroom rose.

**[00:20:00]** *Yeah, I've actually had a couple of people describe the proceedings in the courtroom around Father Louie and the exchange with the judge and this was at the point—I've heard, I guess, a couple of different stories, or maybe you can describe it a little bit, the proceedings that you recall.*

That's it. It was very moving. You could tell the judge was respectful and the courtroom was packed, and Louie's mom and dad was even there.

*Right. So that is the story.*

That was the picture in the paper the next day, of Louie walking out with his mom and dad.

*Yeah, that's a good story. So how large was that action that you attended, that first one, do you remember?*

Well, the first thing was the tearing down of the Peace Camp; so there was probably just a dozen of us, and it seemed like there was twenty vehicles that the authorities had brought, and different authorities, you know, state level, county level, Wackenhut, or that would be before Wackenhut, whatever the name of them was. And the media was there. There was TV coverage because it was all public that this is what would happen, and it did. And so it was moving to be a part of that.

So then the first action I remember, there might've been a few small ones that I attended, but then American Peace Test [APT] had a large action in the spring of 1990, and they'd asked me if I could help pick up some of their people at the airport and bring them out to the test site. So it was a very resurrection experience for me, after having been there when the Peace Camp was torn down, to come back in whether it was March or April of 1990 and to see like a thousand tents set up.

*On that little piece of property.*

It was further down the highway. It was further up highway '95.

*Oh, I know where that is. Yeah, you have to go—yeah.*

Yeah, there's like a little cliff area in there, yeah. And so it was such a joy to see that, it was so alive, and that's when I think I met Jack and Felice Cohen-Joppa who do the *Nuclear Resister* magazine, they were there. They put the *Nuclear Resister* out together. It's a regular newsletter that's been going out for twenty-five-plus years. Out of Tucson, actually. And that was dramatic because we hosted two young people from East Germany who came for that event, and we



hosted them here and they got to know the friar community. They had a part in helping to bring down the Berlin Wall.

*Oh, yeah, that was just right after that.*

Yeah, that had just happened, and they were basically telling us that they all got co-opted; that it was a grassroots young people's movement to bring it down and then the movement got co-opted, but they were still jubilant with all that had happened. And so they had gone out to the test site. And that's when I first met Corbin Harney. I got to help him take down his tipi at the end of the event.

But NDE had other events that spring. Very moved by it. There was one that was called Roses in the Desert, you know, in the midst of this dry desert and all of a sudden everybody got a rose who was involved with the action. And we had Franciscans from around the country coming and other people of goodwill. I had been impressed by the NDE events from what I had read about them before attending them and then by attending them I was very moved by the sense of liturgy and prayer that was involved in the protest, and the love for the opponent.

*Right. Right. I think that is a very unique aspect of protest and of NDE protest in particular, and I had the opportunity to do an oral history with [former Nye County Sheriff] Jim Merlino and that's one thing that he said, which I was really surprised to hear, is that one of the first exchanges that he had with NDE really set the way that that protest out there happened. He I think had been hoping for a peaceful experience but really was impressed that there was contact and communication.*

Maybe I could say something about the importance, from what I see, the importance of the Franciscan presence here that helped to develop all this. And Louie Vitale personified that; but the fact that there was this praying community here, Rosemary and Klaryta came in 1977, it just

kind of like sparked and they [said], Let's focus on the test site, and as people came through here they were moved to that. It was very much grounded. So that love of the opponent was grounded in, the spirituality and prayer life of this community, and I think it influenced even non-Catholics or non-Christians. They got involved.

*[00:25:00] I think it did, too. I was going to ask you if you could describe, at least from your perspective, what NDE's relationship was with groups like American Peace Test and other—because I know at several times there were lots of large actions that were made up of many different groups that had come out there, and so what is NDE's relationship to these groups?*

Well, I would say, I don't know if you got this story yet, but American Peace Test was founded right in this back house over here [at Nevada Desert Experience in Las Vegas].

*No, I actually didn't know that.*

Yes. It might've been after an NDE event or something. They had people from the Freeze Movement, and so those who wanted to start doing civil disobedience in the Freeze Movement, I guess had realized that the Freeze wasn't going to be going that direction and so American Peace Test was founded. And there was a meeting in the back house here. Jessie Cocks, I don't know if you've run across her name—

*I have.*

She was part of that, and then with Jim and Shelley Douglass, she was here for that, and others. I wasn't here but I got this secondhand and it's been confirmed several times over that this actually happened here.

*That's good to know.*

And so, from the very beginning there was an intertwining between American Peace Test and Nevada Desert Experience; we were more narrowly focused in the perimeters of faith-based and

American Peace Test was much larger. I think they were very much active in the colleges and universities and had a national scope to it, much broader than NDE. I would say, as far as organizing and getting people out here because they're the ones that created the large events with thousands of people. I guess the largest was about five thousand, something like that, that came out here at one time.

*Well, I mean this makes sense to me now because I'd been reading some things that have been written about American Peace Test and some excerpts of interviews, and one of the things that I came across was them saying that the Nevada Desert Experience had really been influential in how they shaped their ideas of actions and protest, and they used basically Nevada Desert Experience's guidelines, I mean as the skeleton on which to base their programs.*

And even at the School of the Americas protest, they'd actually had it in print, when I was down there in '98, These are guidelines from the Nevada Desert Experience and their brochures.

*And so I mean that's one of the things that I think is really just amazing about NDE is that people say, Oh, we're just this small little group, but I mean the—*

It's the mustard seed kind of idea.

*Exactly. You've got some far-reaching—*

I believe that very much, I think more than we really realize.

*Well, that's an interesting little—*

And there was even relational connections, too. One of the staffers for NDE was in a relationship with an APT staffer and so they were working together.

So when I came back—because I was here in '89-'90, then I was sent elsewhere as I joined the friars—then I began coming back in the summers in '94, '95, and '96, and in early '97 I moved back here. Even though when I wasn't living here, I came back because I began

working with NDE in '93 through our Justice and Peace Office; in '94 I came in on staff, so for five years I was on the staff of NDE.

*And what did you do?*

Helping to organize the events. My best event, my favorite, was the '95 event. It was the August Desert Witness. We had 500 people here and it was beautiful—the best of what it indeed does in bringing people together from a diverse background, interfaith, from all different perspectives, creativity, dancers, the liturgy, Corbin Harney, *hibakusha* were there to speak. And then my second-best event was we had 350 people come for Dorothy Day's one-hundredth birthday in 1997. We had over fifty-five Catholic Worker communities represented, and we actually had the big civil disobedience on her actual hundredth birthday. I don't know, I think we had 175 arrests or something, 200 arrested that day. And then a lot of the smaller events. And then collaborating with Healing Global Wounds. I don't know if you've contacted Jennifer Viereck yet but she's available in Tecopa [California] and I've got her address with me.

*She works with Corbin, correct?*

She has worked with Corbin in the past. Right now she's not but she's got a project called HOME, Healing Our Mother Earth. And I've got her phone number for you, if you like. So she got involved in '92 for the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's coming and there was a very large event they had in '92. So then, through the nineties when I was on the staff, we [00:30:00] collaborated a lot; I would lead the annual Holy Week walk from Las Vegas to the test site. I think I led it about six times.

*Right, and that's preceding the Lenten Desert Experience [LDE]?*

Part of the Lenten LDE. And then she was leading the Healing Global Wounds which was on Easter weekend. So then if there was a dozen of us or fifteen of us, when we got to the test site

Peace Camp, we would be greeted by a couple of hundred people there, so it worked out really well. We did a Nuclear Stations of the Cross that the Catholic Workers do every year. And it was a great week. And there were sweat lodges and Corbin and the morning prayer circles and the different workshops, and then she organized that part of it. She would get people from around the world coming in. Islanders, you know, who were affected by nuclear testing would be there. People from Kazakhstan would come out. So she did a really good job with that.

*And so it sounds like you were active with Nevada Desert Experience during this time right around the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty [CTBT]. I think it was going maybe into effect right when you had gotten here.*

Well, the last test was in '92, just before the first Bush [George H.W. Bush] left office and then, so that's right when I came on, so there was the campaign to try to get Bill Clinton to—

*Right. And was that a large focus for you guys?*

It was a focus. I think with NDE we've never—some groups are more activist, for example, do you know Marylia Kelly in the Bay Area, Tri-Valley Cares?

*I've heard the name.*

She's helped us organize the events at Livermore. Well, she's much more focused on what's going on at Livermore up to the minute. That's never been our strength. Our strength is our spirituality. We try to stay on top of things but we've never been the experts there. And so certainly as an important part of our events, we'd always try to bring a focus to it. We'd bring experts in to speak about the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and give all of our attendees updates on what was going on. But that was always just a part of what we were doing. The other part—well, for example, in August '95 we extended it from August—it started on a Friday evening, August fourth, and it went to August ninth, and so about a hundred of the five hundred

people stayed all the way through August ninth. And on August seventh, the day after the big action at the test site, we had a panel discussion, and it's all on videotape, we've got it somewhere. We had people like Mary Manning was a part of that for the *Las Vegas Sun* speaking, Frank Strabala who had been in charge of the test site was there, Ian Zabarte, Louie Vitale, Sister Rosemary Lynch, Judy Treichel, we just had this great panel, it was really a joy.

*What a fascinating panel!*

And it was with a hundred people there, you know, so it was just extraordinary for that kind of—

*That's pretty amazing.*

So that was a piece of our event, our educational piece for our event. We also did a tour of the test site the next day, and then we had an action on the ninth, so that was how we concluded. We had the five hundred people from Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

*Now, you mentioned that that first time you went out there, you didn't choose to cross over the line or—*

Because I was on a bus trip, I had a bus pass.

*Have you since done things like that?*

Oh, yeah, dozens of times. I've never done a stronger action myself, so I've only just gone into the pen.

*And what are some of the meanings that surround that for you?*

Well, again, having a hero, a Dr. Martin Luther King—so for me the key, the top thing is not obedience. As a matter of fact, in my philosophical thinking, it's things like blind obedience [that] lead to atrocities like Nazism and genocide; and so we need to belong to our consciences, and so there are times where you stand up to the law and you break the law in a conscientious way. And I believe in that and so to add emphasis to the protest of nuclear weapons, like crossing

the line makes sense to me. And I understand those who do stronger actions but I'm queasy with the Ploughshares because even holding a hammer can be threatening to some people; but I know the people who are involved with Ploughshares are so committed to nonviolence, they're only going to be aiming for the nose of the warhead or something. But it still gives me some queasy feelings in my stomach.

*Sure. What were your interactions like with the security that was there?*

I was resting on the shoulders of Anne Symens-Bucher and Louie Vitale and Duncan McMurdy and Ed Dunn and Mike Affleck, all those who had done that groundwork that you've discovered in your research and it was developing those relationships, so I could recognize it right away that that was there. And I can remember my first time out that there was, [00:35:00] not danger but a sense of unease because like what was going to happen. I remember having that feeling. And then as I saw that these relationships were there, I was more at ease.

*Right. Somebody, I can't remember who it was that I was speaking with, they described it as if you're going to commit an act of civil disobedience, this is probably the safest way to begin doing that, which in one sense is a little ironic because you're out there at the test site on public lands but—*

There's definitely a different tone. Definitely a different tone at places like Lawrence Livermore labs with the security. Have you been there?

*I have not been out to Lawrence Livermore, no.*

It's definitely different. They have the helmets. They have the batons. It's a little more laid-back out here.

*Yeah, very laid-back. It's the West. How does your family feel about your involvement with this as you became more and more active with antinuclear—?*

Acceptance of it. There's a joke. My cousin came out to visit me when I was here in Las Vegas and I told him we'd be having a protest at the test site. So as we're walking up I said, well, if you don't want to get arrested, you can hold the canopy as we—so he's like trying to decide what to do, and he decides to hold the canopy. So we still joke about it to this day. And my brother came out one time and we were going to go out to Death Valley afterwards. He was like on a business trip, had a couple of days, and so I said, well, meet me at the test site. We got an event going. And so he watched the whole proceedings and he was talking on the side with the security guards and everything and he said, well, you're not going to get arrested, are you? I said, Don't worry, we'll be out of here within an hour. He was afraid I was going to blow everything and our time that we were going to have together.

*Yeah, you guys had a schedule to stick to. So overall, it sounds like they've been pretty supportive.*

Yes, and they know—like my mom and dad have met Louie. When I took my solemn vows, we have this tradition of selecting two friars to be like our sponsors, and I selected Louie and Ed Dunn, who has since died. But then so my mom and dad got to meet Louie, and they met him out here, I think, when they came to visit me when I was out here. And when I was in San Francisco, I lived with Louie for a couple of years in San Francisco, too.

*That's nice. So in the time that you've been involved with NDE and had awareness of, I guess, issues that not just impact the test site but the larger issue of nuclear weapons, but in terms of NDE, from where its purpose was to how it functions now, has it changed? Has it shifted for you?*



No. Having seen NDE from the inside, I suspect that it's always been a shoestring operation, so like on the worldly perspective, it's like how does it operate? But it's very dedicated people, and again it's trusting in Providence. It's the same experience trying to do charity with the boards, like how does it all come together, how are you going to meet your budgets and all that, but because of people's dedication and commitments, it works. So I'm so grateful for my five years' working that closely in NDE and I regret it's been so long since I got back to an action. Since we moved from Las Vegas two-and-a-half years ago, I hadn't made an action out here till this weekend, so it was so good to be back out again.

*Where do you currently live?*

In Tucson, Arizona. San Xavier Mission. I'm involved with migrant work right now and homeless work right now.

*In the five years that you worked with NDE, who were the folks that you worked with, the core group of folks at that time?*

Well, let's see, from '94 to early '97, so for like three years I would come down in the summers or I would come down for extended time in the spring for like Lenten Desert Experience, and so I was here in Las Vegas. But when I was up in the Bay Area, I worked out of our JPIC Office and Anne Symens-Bucher was our JPIC rep for the Province. I worked with Anne, and a little bit with Ken Butigan, and then Louie [Vitale] of course. I lived with Louie. So when I was in the Bay Area I was living at St. Boniface and I'd go across the Bay and we had our office in Oakland at our Franciscan headquarters. We were accepted there. We got permission from the Guardian to take a little room in the back garden. That was our office. We had to string telephone lines out there. It was a great place to work. It was in front of this beautiful garden. So we had a telephone and a fax machine and a computer also. And then out here, Father Alain Richard was

very supportive. He was a member of the friar community here, and Sister Rosemary and Sister Klaryta. And then when we had the big events. In '94 Julia [Occhiogrosso] and Gary [Cavalier] from the Catholic Worker had gotten married, they were away on a sabbatical, [00:40:00] and they came back early to help run the Catholic Worker and take it back over. They got involved right away with organizing August '95, and then also a former friar, Dan Olivieri, so it was like four of us on that event. And then in '97, I had moved here and then was working out of our Las Vegas office. Julia and Gary were so involved with the Las Vegas Catholic Worker, more of the work fell on me. And Jody Hart came in. He was an intern for about a year.

*So it sounds like there's been a core group of people there that have been involved on and off throughout the—*

Well, NDE's got a board, but really, let's see, I think there's two people that have been on the board the longest—the most significant people are Anne and Louie, I would say, over the years. They've been consistent from the beginning. And over the last seven or eight years, Erik Thompson and Chris Montesano have been there. And like any board, you've got people who show up and people who don't. So there was a core group, and Louie and Anne are the ones that always show up and bring the consistency between them over the years.

*Where do you see Nevada Desert Experience fitting into the picture right now in terms of the time that we're in, and I guess their continuing role in this ongoing story?*

I think NDE's at its best when they are able to organize those large events and the small events. It seems like the large events will draw in all the board members and all the—people will stop in. They had four hundred and something people last August for the sixtieth anniversary [of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki]. And when I was working with NDE, what I realized [is] it'd be people—you wouldn't hear from them for several years, a lot of

organizations were dropping—but then an event [snaps fingers] captures them and they come back; it's like they never left and they're so grateful to be back again. So it touches people on a deep level. It's not a peripheral experience. It's a deep experience that people have here. And it's similar, I think, where I'm at now at San Xavier Mission where we have tourists from all over the world come to the mission. It's a two-hundred-year-old mission. It's like the symbol for Tucson. And I say that people come there as tourists and leave as pilgrims. Something deeply touches them there when they see the artwork. And I would say that something similar happens at the Nevada Test Site in an NDE event for many, many people. We had a man here, he had met me in 1998 at an NDE event, and he came back for August Desert Witness from Southern California. And he was just sharing with us on the drive out there how deeply he was affected by the prayer.

*And do you think that's a combination—what do you think it is that affects people so much out there? Because I've heard people say that, similar things.*

I think what NDE's strength is somehow to have these protests in the context of like a liturgy, an inviting liturgy, not a liturgy that would put somebody off, but a liturgy to allow people who tend to be busy, professionals caught up in the twenty-first-century life to slow down, come in touch with things that are deeper, and make connections. And I think when we have Corbin [Harney] there he does the same thing, connecting with the earth, with our spirituality, with our being human on this beautiful Mother Earth, which of course is what St. Francis helped us to do. Brother Sun, Sister Moon. And again, the horror of nuclear weapons, which from the very moment I heard that Franciscans were out here made sense to me because it's the antithesis of the beautiful creation. It's what can destroy this beautiful creation and its potential.

*Do you think that the essence of the desert itself plays a role in any of that?*

Very much so. Very much so, yeah.

*What type of meaning does that hold?*

I spent time—yeah. Jesus went to the desert to pray, and the early desert [Church] Fathers and Mothers went out to the desert to pray. It's a place of solitude. I've had the experience myself many times. Being out there at Peace Camp—that first time I was out there they were tearing the Peace Camp down and trying to protect it, and they had the beautiful full moon and the stars. When Hale-Bopp was up there, I was out there at the Peace Camp and there was Hale-Bopp [comet, 1997]. We got to see Hale-Bopp before it was on the news. So it really was beautiful. And it's the starkness of it; but yet if you're uneducated you could say it's barren but when you're out there it's so full of life. And then like the joy in the spring after some rains, the little colorful flowers that pop up, you know, even though they're small little ones, they're not lush like you would have in some other places, but even those little pockets of flowers, oh, what a joy it is to see that. And having [00:45:00] done the hike, the walk from Vegas to the test site, they experienced the desert even more deeply, then we would camp out each night along the road. And the majesty of some of the bigger cactus, what do you call them?

*Like the barrel cactus or the—?*

No, the ones that are at Joshua Tree [National Park]. Yeah, Joshua trees. So there's a few spots along the route where we would come across them. And it's out there. One reflection I had at some point in the Peace Camp was on our side of the road where the Peace Camp was. We had full of rock-lined little pathways and that, but it's very much with the nature, we were very conscious. And then looking across the way with all that had happened, not only the creation of the town of Mercury and all the infrastructure that's on the test site but all the bombs that had been dropped there, and the reflection, all the billions of dollars that had been spent there, and on

our side of the street there wasn't much money spent at all. A lot of love was poured into that, a lot of relationships, and that on our side was much more on solid ground and in harmony, in harmony with eternity than what's over there. It's like the hare and the tortoise, it's like here's all this stuff, all this money and resources that have been poured over there on that side of it, and then someday it's going to all disappear, so this can all be barren. And what's been happening on our side, the respect for Mother Earth, the working for a peaceful world, a nuclear-free world, that's what's enduring.

*That's a really insightful juxtaposition.*

I spent a lot of time out here so I had time to come up with some insights. Hopefully there are some good ones in there.

*Well, I think that's got to be one of the unique aspects of being able to spend time in the desert and it's got to be fairly introspective.*

*Of all the various groups that have been around throughout the years, Nevada Desert Experience seems to have had a longevity that some other groups haven't experienced. What do you think that can be attributed to?*

On some level is the personal commitments of a handful of people who've been that consistency, so I would say Anne [Symens-Bucher] and Louie [Vitale]. Now, if their commitments ended, what would happen to NDE? I don't know. I would say that God has used them to help make this happen, the little mustard seed of their lives, and they've had helpers along the way, for various lengths. I put in five years of my time and other people like Peter [Ediger] put in many years within the earlier years. And again, that ongoing support that even appears in with Pace e Bene so he would always show up for the events. Or even people like Charlie Hilfenhaus. He was a great support for me.

*And he's known as Peace Camp Charlie?*

Yeah, I think that's—yes.

*I've heard people talk about him but they haven't used his last name.*

He was telling us the story that he used to work for a couple of years at one of the nuclear power plants in California before he came out to begin his activist work, so he's a very scientific-type person and understands a lot of how things work at the nuclear test site, the different components of that machine.

*It's got to be interesting to see both sides.*

Have you met with Charlie?

*No, but I think [Sister] Megan [Rice] mentioned that he's around.*

Oh, you were going to meet with him. Yeah, he's around and he could tell you about the backcountry actions. He was involved with those. You know there was one action where people sponsored by Greenpeace sat actually on the ground zero to prevent a test from happening.

*I've heard about that.*

He was involved with that.

*Good to know. So, what are some of the things that stand out for you about, I guess, the work that you've done with NDE and then—?*

It's something that I'm very proud of. You know, I'm very happy to have participated and tried to use my gifts to try to—I think I tried to do it from a very deep place in my being, tried to extend myself to help make different events happen, and was very pleased to be able to do that. And then to see the fruits of it when people came together, and to observe people having that deep experience, whether it might be their first time to cross the line or something that's going

on in their lives and, for whatever reason, they might be crying at the time as they're preparing before a liturgy or during a liturgy out at the test site, you could see people being moved.

*There's a very human component to it.*

Anyway, and pleased with the relationships we've had with the security people there. I met a Mark Somebody and he says, I remember you.

I said, well, how long you been out here?

Oh, I've been with you guys out here twenty-two years.

[00:50:00] Because we were talking about Captain Mike who died, Captain Mike Bordner.

*Yes, I heard that.*

And here's something I'll share with you. I can remember this distinctly. Our first action back at the test site after 9/11 [2001], I sensed from the security personnel they were glad to see us because it was like, we're back, kind of getting back to normal.

*So familiarity. Well, that's interesting.*

Yeah, because like, what's going to happen after this horrible event happened, what's it going to mean? And I was happy, too, to see it was the same, or are we going to have a harder reaction from them? Was this 9/11 going to affect how we're looking at each other now? And it wasn't. It was we were back to normal in the sense that they were pleased that it was, that they were pleased that it was back to normal, it was like, oh, we're glad to see you back out here.

*That's interesting. I mean because in a sense it is very ritualized and it's become very ritualized, and I think it's interesting in the larger context; sometimes, if there's not some kind of confrontation, people don't, the larger public doesn't understand what it's for.*

Right, is not interested in it. It's not newsworthy. Yes.

*Right, or what good are you doing? So given that, and that you've participated in this and been a part of it for so long, what do you think the impact has been of yours and Nevada Desert Experience's continued presence out there?*

Yeah, again it's a mustard seed, like the example, that telegram coming from the Soviet Union, that they were being moved by what's going on; and how humbling it was, you know, we might have thirty people or a hundred people and they would have ten thousand people at their gathering sometimes. Even compared to the APT events and they were thousands, I think the biggest NDE's ever had is maybe six hundred or seven hundred people for an event, but still, they come, those people come generally from a deeper place within their being. I mean the human person, we have such potential in each individual, and somehow NDE's space that it creates allows us to come on a deeper level that's letting us use our creativity and be more expansive in our presence, in our effect, among ourselves and in people that we know, so it takes greater root, I guess, in people. I experienced that in the five years I was here to see people come back several years later from one event to the other and it's like, is that a connection again? And they're like, Well, it's good to be back. Because it's not just coming for a protest. And then part of it is also the relationships that are developed, you know, among us.

*And it seems that there's a community, whether it's centrally located in one spot or happens when people get together, there's definitely a community.*

And you shouldn't put it on one person but Louie [Vitale] is somebody that's just unique. I mean there he is right now fasting for peace in Iraq for four weeks and he's so sick that they said, We don't like to let you—he wanted to go into Lebanon with his group and they won't let him because he's got a sick stomach and they don't want to take anybody sick, so he came back today, I think. But after fasting for four weeks on liquids, and seventy-four years old.



*That is amazing. That's energy.*

So yeah, those kind of people inspire us, and also kind of help guide us. And he sets the example. So, all these good traits that are in NDE, you could say they're personified in people like him or even Anne Symens-Bucher, I mean in many ways just poured herself out for how many, for more than half of her life, while raising a large family.

*Yes, that's pretty moving. Well, I certainly appreciate you taking the time to chat with me about this.*

It's great to recollect.

*And your experiences are majorly important.*

It's a great project and I pray that NDE will continue, that they grow strong and be guided to help the world realize the horror that nuclear weapons represent. We've been so fortunate to go sixty-plus years without it happening again, but with the way of the world, it's like I think partly because of my work at NDE that probably I'm more aware than most of how fragile this quasi-non-nuclear period is that we've experienced in the last sixty years and what the horror would be if it happened again, just like reading that book by John Hersey, that reality can happen at any time, and Lord help us. And this leadership right now in the United States I don't think is taking us the right path with the role we could be playing in leadership toward a nuclear-free world or not, or toward a world that would respect the ecology and global warming and all that. We're not. It seems like we're going for bigger profits and the administration believes if we could just give a tax break for the rich we'd be all right.

*Bottom line always, the economics, it seems like. Yeah, I think that's an interesting perspective is there's two—I've heard it said two ways, that the test site itself, the existence of it represents peace, right? And then of course the flip side is that, how can we have peace with its existence?*

And with all the money that's being spent, that could be used for health care and education.

You've got school districts starving for funds. It seems to always be able to find the extra money, extra billions of dollars for the war, but we can't find them for the things that would be—and if we could export helping educate the world and bringing health care to the world, that's how you build peace.

*Right. Well, thank you. I appreciate it.*

Thank you.

**[00:55:55]** End Track 2, Disc 1.

[End of interview]