

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

**Interview with  
Erik Thompson**

**March 4, 2006  
Las Vegas, Nevada**

Interview Conducted By  
Suzanne Becker

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Produced by:

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## Interview with Erik Thompson

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## Interview with Erik Thompson

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

**Erik Thompson:** My name is Erik Thompson. I find myself back in the town I grew up in, Milan, Minnesota, a town of 350 people out on the prairie. I'm fourth-generation there. I left there to go to college in the [San Francisco] Bay Area in the mid-seventies. This was just after the world food crisis. I had some trouble understanding how there could be a world food crisis because there was food as far as I could see out there on the prairie. [I] got to college and tended to take economics and political science courses that focused on development, and in those courses I discovered that people were hungry because they were poor. Then the circle got a little wider when I discovered that people were poor because they had no power. And a little later, I discovered that one of the reasons they don't have power was because of the large military complex that exists both in the developed and developing worlds. So that was pretty formative for me.

After college I joined the Peace Corps, went out to Micronesia, spent a couple of years there. I was in Central Micronesia, but Eastern Micronesia was where the United States did its nuclear bombings in the Pacific, in the Marshall Islands. While I was there, Micronesia was working toward a status of independence. They were a Trust Territory administered by the United States at the time. And the islands west of me had hoped to have a nuclear-free constitution, which I thought was pretty neat. Then the islands north of me in Micronesia, the islands just north of Guam, were where the *Enola Gay* and *Bockscar* took off from to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So I was living out there in this area where nuclearism was an issue, and felt that I should be doing something about that.

When I got back to graduate school—

*Which was where?*

All of my education was at Stanford [University]. I made some connections with the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement. Ched Myers was involved with it at the time. And through that, I broadened my—well, I had an interest in the independent Pacific because Micronesia was the last of the post-World War II Trust Territories, so it was a U.S. colony. Everything else had become independent. Micronesia was working toward independence—something that the United States could convince the United Nations was something resembling independence. And I was pretty impressed that there was an organization that had combined the nuclear-free and independence movements. These small islands in the Pacific felt that the larger powers weren't paying any attention to their sovereignty because, as Henry Kissinger said about Micronesia, there's only ninety thousand of them, who gives a damn?

So through my interest in the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific, and other things that were happening at the time, the MX missile was about to be tested south of Stanford, and the missiles from there are shot into Micronesia, into the Marshall Islands, into Kwajalein Atoll. So I was aware that that was happening.

I went to a nonviolence training seminar in order to do some preparation for putting my body on the line if I would ever be called to do that. At about this time, I heard Father Louis Vitale speak at a World Peace Day celebration in San Francisco, and he mentioned what the Franciscans were doing out at the Nevada Test Site. They had started a year or two before I heard him. And he invited folks to come out during Lent. Well, I thought that was quite interesting and I filed that in the deep recesses of the brain.

But I felt more and more called to act about the MX missile testing from Vandenberg [Air Force Base, California], and my affinity group with whom I trained were planning to go [00:05:00] down. But as it turned out, just prior to the action, I discovered that my mother had terminal pancreatic cancer, and so I ended up going home during that break from college instead of down to Vandenberg.

*That was back to Minnesota?*

Yes. But I had made a commitment to put my body on the line. I just didn't know when and where. I decided that Good Friday of my final year at Stanford, I was in the business school at that time, Good Friday at Lawrence Livermore labs would be an appropriate place to take that step. And I thought, in order to prepare for that, I would come out to the Nevada Test Site and spend a few days with the friars at the beginning of Holy Week. This was 1984. So that was the first time I came to the Nevada Test Site.

*What did you think, meaning what were some of the things that struck you?*

Well, I hadn't ever even witnessed an act of civil resistance that risked arrest before, which is why I came, to experience that. And I was struck by the sincerity of the small group that were there, must've been for the Palm Sunday action. At that time, we were able to actually drive all the way down near what's now the Pass Gate. It was on the fringes of Camp Desert Rock, so we could actually see signs of when the military people were camped there prior to being marched over to the above-ground testing sites. I was aware that we had exposed about a quarter-million of our own men and women to nuclear weapons testing in the American West and in the Marshall Islands. One of the things that strikes me when we talk about how bad Saddam Hussein was, was that he did bad things to his own people. Well, I would consider, among the other atrocities that the United States government has committed against its own people, the willful

contamination of a quarter-million of them with nuclear fallout; people who were in the military, not even counting the Downwinders.

But back to my story. I recall that there wasn't any barbed wire down there. There were nylon ropes between the fence posts. And I recall a woman passing through the ropes and the sheriff, Jim Merlino, who of course is a good old boy, what do you do when a woman's crossing through a fence? Well, you hold the bottom one down with your foot and you lift the top one up with your hand. So he's doing that as this woman passes through, and halfway through she says, *Jim, you're helping me.* And he got this sort of sheepish look on his face. She passed through, turned to face maybe the dozen of us who were on the other side. I think there were probably three people arrested that day. She turned to face the small group of us as they were handcuffing her behind her back and said, *Would you all join me in the Lord's Prayer?* And not only had I never witnessed a civil resistance arrest before, but I had never experienced the Lord's Prayer under those circumstances—an extremely moving experience.

Anyway, I felt empowered after that first trip down there. I went back to Lawrence Livermore, thought we would be in jail. We were arrested on Good Friday. Thought I'd be in jail over the weekend, but they did release us that night.

*And this is at the test site or this is at Lawrence Livermore?*

This was at Lawrence Livermore. And I was a student senator at Stanford at the time, so I went down to the students' paper and said, *Is this news, Student Senator arrested at Lawrence Livermore?* So it was in the Monday edition. And people from the business school came up to me—this is the Stanford Business School, these are not your typical left-wing groupies—came up to me and said what a wonderful thing it was and if there was a fine, make sure to let them know, they'd pay it off for me.

*What was the atmosphere at Stanford like at that particular time, considering the proximity to the laboratories and some of the activities that were being conducted?*

[00:10:00] I would say the nuclear awareness was minimal. There had been a fairly substantial student movement on campus related to investments in apartheid South Africa, so there was some student activism at the time. That would've been like '78, '79 or so. But I think that the nuclear issue was not talked about very much. Once in a while a flyer would come out about how much Stanford was getting from the Department of Defense, but nothing specific to nuclear that I recall.

So the next year I came back, 1985, brought a friend from the Bay Area. It was the fortieth anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, so the Nevada Desert Experience [NDE] was hosting a Jewish/Christian/Buddhist remembrance. And we walked into the test site from roughly where we are stopped now, down the long road, so it was a long procession. The theme was Forty Years in the Nuclear Wilderness, so we had a pilgrimage, basically, down to Camp Desert Rock. And then we were trucked up to Beatty for appearance before the Justice of the Peace there. My memory is that there were about thirty of us.

*And so the group of you all crossed over?*

I think about thirty crossed over the line.

*OK. And you guys were arrested.*

We were arrested. And at that point, people were being prosecuted. The expectation was that people would get three days of community service in their hometowns. Well, we arrived up at the Justice of the Peace Court, which of course wasn't big enough to handle all of us, so we went in in waves of ten. And at the end of it, Judge Sullivan found us all guilty. And he said, well, you know, this is costing the county money to put up with you people, so I'm

going to sentence you to three days of community service here in Beatty, Nevada.

Well, some people had obligations that didn't fit in nicely with, so there was this negotiation with the judge. How about if we do one day here and two days back home? Or one day here and three days back home? We'll do more time. Well, he wasn't willing to give on any of that.

And then somebody said, How about if we go to jail?

And he said, I guess I can throw you all in jail for twenty-four hours.

So we said, That sounds great! [Laughing]

They bused us up to Tonopah because the Beatty jail wasn't big enough. We joked that during this remembrance of Forty Years in the Nuclear Wilderness, in one day we traveled from Vegas to the test site to Beatty to Tonopah, we traveled further in a day than the Israelites traveled in forty years. And of course it ended up costing the county more money. So I have had some trouble figuring out the way the authorities respond to us.

*Yeah, what do you think about that? People have had varying responses. Because sometimes the charges are just dismissed.*

Well, what happened shortly after the action that I mentioned was that the American Peace Test started holding protests out there, and I participated in one of those that had 6,000 participants, and 1,205 of us arrested on one day. The authorities had pre-positioned buses at the test site, and they were rolling into Tonopah after dark.

*In anticipation of dealing with the mass numbers of people that they may arrest?*

Right. And they hauled us all to Tonopah, and then just released us. I just found out recently that [00:15:00] what may have led to what I'm going to explain was a lawyer who had been arrested, refusing to leave and claiming to have been kidnapped. What I heard happened is that shortly

after this, the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] brought suit on our behalf, basically alleging kidnapping, since we were transported that far with no intention of being prosecuted. This is all hearsay, but I believe that this is what happened.

*And this is something that recently came to light?*

The fact that a lawyer was arrested and decided to do it. I thought the ACLU just thought it was a good cause. As a result of that, the authorities were enjoined from transporting us further than the nearest Justice Court. I was told. And after this event, we were never hauled further than Beatty anymore, so I think that that's what happened.

*There may be some truth to that.*

My favorite action at the test site happened around—it's a little bit of a long story.

*It's your time frame, so you let me know. We've got plenty of time left on the CDs.*

I could be off by a year or two on the dates, but I believe it was 1988, and either Hiroshima or Nagasaki Day. Hiroshima Day, I believe. There were a small group of us arrested. At this point the authorities had stopped even hauling us places, unless we did something that really annoyed them.

*Were they just processing you onsite?*

Yes, the county had decided it wasn't worth their trouble to even deal with us in the court system anymore. They were still arresting us in some fashion. The cage had been built for us by that point.

*Do you happen to remember what year—sorry to interrupt—what year those came about, the different pens?*

I'm pretty sure they were not there in 1985, and they were there for the large action—

*With the American Peace Test.*

Yes, and I don't remember the date of that action.

*Probably mid-eighties?*

I'm pretty sure they were here for the action—yes, they [the pens] were, for the action I'm talking about now, so by '88 or '89. And then they were continually improved. And the guards got nicer quarters to hang out while they were waiting for us. For a while there was a large like a fire watch tower that a guard could be in to look down. But that came down at some point, and lights went up—there was a generator first and then I think they got electric lines laid.

But anyway, in Hiroshima [day] of say 1988, a small number of us were arrested. While we were in the holding pen, we decided that if they released us, which was our expectation, we would cross the line again, with the expectation that they would haul us away to jail at that point. Well, they released us, we crossed, they put us in the cage for an hour or two, released us, and so we crossed again. And we came to the conclusion among ourselves that it wasn't going to be another day like usual at the test site, that this was an important day to remember what the U.S. did with these weapons, and that we were not willing to leave the test site of our own free will for that day. As a consequence, we were arrested eight times that day, and they never did haul us to Beatty.

*They just kept reprocessing you?*

Yes, and a couple of hours later—

*Were you given citations?*

Yes, and a couple hours later, they would let us go. I think they drove us up to the overpass on the test site, which is maybe a half-mile from the line. Interesting for our last arrest, it was dark, and we walked down from where they dropped us off, so it took us a little while to decide we were in fact going to go through again.

*So they basically put you on a bus and thought they'd drive you a little bit further out and drop you off?*

Yes. It was up probably where we were parked, hoping that we'd get in our cars and drive away. In fact, during one of the arrests—we had one person who stayed [00:20:00] behind from the large group, so that if we got hauled to Beatty he could follow and if they released us immediately, give us a ride back, or at least let people know what was going on. And it's common practice at these to have support people who do not risk arrest—sometimes they are arrested anyway—who try to remain free so that they can provide support that's necessary. But on our fourth arrest, our support person said, Ah, they're not going to take him. I'm coming in with you. So we were all together for one of them. It was three of us who remained there, Father Louis Vitale and I and Steve Kelly, who is a Jesuit priest. Father Vitale's a Franciscan priest.

On our final arrest, it was dark. As we walked the last half-mile and got to the line and crossed the line, it became clear to us that the authorities didn't realize we were back on the property, because it was not lighted or they weren't paying attention. And you know, we feel some sense of camaraderie with the Nye County deputies who are out there. So we had to decide what it is we wanted to do with this opportunity. Were we going to walk down to the town of Mercury? And we didn't feel that that would be fair to the deputies, so our compromise was we would sing as we walked.

*To give them a little heads-up.*

So we walked down to Mercury, toward Mercury, singing, and they immediately shone their light at the crossing area and couldn't find us. Eventually shone the light further down the road

and came to get us. When they released us after that time, it was after midnight and we had fulfilled the pledge we had made to each other for the day.

But while we were there, Steve Kelly, Father Louis and I decided, because we had lots of time together, that the next time we were all together we would attempt to go down to the chapel in the town of Mercury. Father Louis had had a dream of reconsecrating it. We had heard rumors that there was a chapel in the town, but that it had been turned into a nuclear weapons lab, office building. And during Holy Week of the following year, we were all in Vegas together, and on the morning of Holy Saturday, twelve of us wandered through the desert, got to the town of Mercury right about sunup.

*How did you get in? Did you come in through a fence or did you—were you on test site property, wandering?*

Yes, we were on test site property since about midnight, walking in the dark among the cactus. It was a little slow going. We got to the edge of town and were able to identify by its architecture which building must have been the chapel. We sent a scout over there, and he came back and said, The door is open. And given that date in the Christian calendar, we decided, well, the stone has been rolled away from the tomb. And so we all scurried over there. As near as I can tell, the carpets had been shampooed, and the doors were left open to air the place out. That's the best understanding that I have of the occasion.

*Interesting. So it was just literally by chance that you were able to get in.*

Well, some folks say there are no coincidences but—and we were there for quite a while, sent some faxes, tried to call the media.

*So you were faxing from the chapel and using the phone?*

We called the *Washington Post*, I think, and said, Here we are.

And they said, It's early Saturday morning. Can't you call back at noon?

[And we said], Well, we're not sure we'll be able to be here then.

So we weren't able to actually do anything with the print media, but I was conducting a live radio interview at the time the authorities showed up, and apparently they were listening to the radio.

*So from the chapel, you were able to get through to a radio station.*

Yes, I believe it was a Las Vegas station, talk radio. And actually I think that they might've called the authorities and said, we have somebody who claims to be—is this true? And so the hired security guards—.

**[00:25:00] Is this Wackenhut?**

I think it was them. I'm not sure if they had the contract that long ago.

*Yes, they would have at the time. I was just wondering if it was Nye County or Wackenhut.*

No, the hired ones. Showed up with, I think they had rifles, and looked in on us, and then left. And I told the radio people that, at some point were going to have a worship service and I'll be hanging up on you. I might've left the phone off the hook so they could listen. I can't remember. Apparently Wackenhut was waiting for Nye County to show up, and when they did, they came in, and we were in worship. There were no weapons visible at that point. They did not disturb our worship service.

*They let you finish what you were doing?*

They let us finish what we were doing. Well, they wandered around to see if they could tell if we'd done any damage to the building. We heard one half of a telephone conversation as they reported back to their boss: No, it doesn't look like breaking and entering. Well, it looks like their having a church service. And we had a fairly long service. As we

got near the end of it and were running out of things to do, [Brother] Gary Sponholtz, another Franciscan who had actually carried an Easter lily through the desert that night, started doing a roll of the Catholic canon of saints, so that went on for quite a while. And when we ran out of saints that we could remember, we came up with the saints that should be canonized, like Martin Luther King and Dorothy Day and I don't know if Archbishop [Oscar] Romero had been assassinated by that point, but we kept going, and we just were allowed to do this.

*And they just let you guys go on.*

They just let us do that. So it was a great action. When we finished, they took us into custody, and after a while took us up to Beatty. While we were in there and making the phone calls, we did put the word out that the chapel was rechristened as Holy Trinity Chapel because it was on Trinity Avenue, and that it was open for Easter services. Well, while we were in Beatty Township Jail—maybe they took us to Tonopah, I can't remember, but I think we were in Beatty—Easter Sunday morning two other people went down. The building was still open, and they went in and spent a number of hours there before being arrested. And they were the first people to receive federal charges at the test site.

*Really! Do you remember who those were?*

I want to say Ted Thomas and maybe somebody else named Diamond. And we were in jail at the time and heard—and we were expecting a six-month sentence for our action. We heard that the feds had arrested these two and apparently had said OK, that's it, that's the last straw. What happened is eventually the county dropped the charges against us, apparently saying if the feds are finally willing to get involved, we don't need to expend county resources to do it. So we got a free six months, because we were all sure that that's what we would be looking at. And the two fellows who had the federal charges, I don't remember if they had trials or if they plea-

bargained, but I believe they got probation or something like that. But they were not ready for federal time.

*Right. So you guys received nothing.*

No time. No time at all. Well, we had the weekend in jail till we were released.

*Right. But other than that, beyond that, there were no charges?*

No. But now we all had a free six months we had to figure out what to do with. We had been trying for years to get the issue into federal court, so now we knew how we could do it. And so on the next, I believe it was Nagasaki Day, it was—

*Differentiate for me—there's a Hiroshima Day and a Nagasaki Day?*

Yes, Hiroshima was bombed on August 6 [1945] and Nagasaki on August 9.

**[00:30:00]** *OK, so this is August Desert Witness.*

Correct.

*So you just were delineating the days. OK.*

So on the next Nagasaki Day, while our friends were being arrested at the gate, Louis and I and Gary Sponholtz walked, that night, back to Mercury. And while our friends were being arrested at the front gate, we went back into the chapel. This was a work day, so there were workers present. We invited them to join us in a memorial service, which they declined to do. They of course called Security. Most of Security was involved with our colleagues up at the main gate, so management had to show up.

*How many people were at this particular action, do you remember?*

I don't know that.

*I think these were some of the larger ones, though, that were happening.*

Well, this was probably fifty or a hundred being arrested. The three of us were taken into custody. I refused a citation at that point, and so my arresting officer was required to take me in to appear before a federal magistrate. So I got to spend some time with him during the day. He was a fundamentalist Christian. And I asked him about the part in Acts where some of the early Apostles are preaching on the temple steps, and they are arrested and brought before the court. The court decides to let them go for fear of the people, the Bible says, but tells them not to do it anymore. And the Apostles say, We must obey God rather than man. So I asked this fundamentalist Christian to talk to me about that story in light of the fact that I had been in the chapel once before, I was put in jail, I was released and told not to do it again, and I think that I'm obeying God rather than man. And his response was, I try to avoid these moral dilemmas. So I was glad to have the opportunity to let him grapple with it a little bit.

We appeared in front of a federal magistrate who tried to release me on my own recognizance in kind of a slam-bam-leave-the-room type arrangement. After he was gone, I said to the clerk, Shouldn't someone tell the judge that I'm not willing to be released under these conditions? Which of course were almost no conditions at all except not go back to the test site. So they put me back in custody, and at the end of the day, the judge had me brought back into court and we had a nice conversation for fifteen, twenty minutes or so. I don't remember if I accepted a release at that point or what happened. But anyway, because I had refused a citation and seen the federal magistrate, I got into the court system earlier than Louis and Gary did.

I had my trial a few months later in front of Lloyd George, after whom the new courthouse building in Las Vegas is named. I am told he was an officer in the nuclear Air Force, and a Mormon bishop. I can't confirm that but this is what I was told. I had a jury trial. Of course

the prosecution had moved to prohibit me from mentioning any of the likely defenses I was likely to raise. It's called a necessity defense, which is that, yes, I have to break a trespassing law, but I'm doing it in order to avert a larger ill. The classic example is trespassing to save a baby from a burning building.

*Right. And you were not allowed to use [it]?*

The prosecution moved to prohibit me from raising that, and a number of other defenses, including my state of mind at the time. Actually part of the charge is willful being in the wrong place, and so I was hoping to prove that I thought that the Constitution and the treaties of the United States were the supreme law of the land, and that they not only permitted but obliged me to try to stop my government from doing illegal actions.

*And why was this not permitted?*

The prosecution didn't want it in because they wanted to convict me. Most courts around the country have refused to allow these issues to be raised, because they say it's a trespassing [00:35:00] charge, nothing else. There have been, oh, a handful or more of this type of civil resistance action where the courts have allowed these defenses to be made, and I am aware of a number of cases, a small number, where juries have deadlocked or even acquitted after being allowed to hear the [argument].

*So obviously that's why they didn't want you to bring that out.*

No. I filed an extended response to the motion, the inliminee it's called, the motion to limit the defenses that can be raised, and the judge refused my arguments. So we had my trial. The jury forewoman, I believe her husband, I think he worked in secret military stuff. I said, He works for the government and we don't talk about it, something like that.

*Right. That's not a very impartial jury.*

I asked the judge whether that was cause to have her excused and he said to her, Can you render a fair and impartial verdict? And she said yes, and so he said, no, I think that she can stay on the jury. But of course, not being able to hear any defenses, they really had no choice but to convict me, which in fact they did. And we had all expected to be convicted at the first court level. We made the conscious effort to take this to federal court, now that we knew how to do it. and So we were prepared to go to the next level of appeal, which is what I did. So I was out pending appeal when Gary and Louis were convicted. Actually I had received a sentence of ninety days and five thousand dollars' fine and the cost of my incarceration, which was I think about forty bucks a night.

*That's like a hotel. Cheap.*

So I was out pending appeal when Father Louis and Brother Gary went to trial. They had also been convicted and their sentencing date was Good Friday, which is always a big protest day for us out here in Nevada, and we had 300 people in town. So we all showed up at the federal courthouse for the sentencing. Well, there wasn't room for everyone. I was near the end of the people coming in and I said to the bailiff, You know, the jury box is empty. Can we sit there?

[And he said], No, you can't sit in the jury box.

Well, Judge Lloyd George came in and said, Oh, there's room in the jury box. You can sit there.

So more people got in. And some of us had talked about those of us who wanted to, who were present, also rising during sentencing to indicate our co-conspiracy with the two people about to be sentenced. We thought that when the judge said, Will the defendants please rise? that that's when we would rise. Well, Louis was standing up the whole time. He was sentenced first. He was standing at a podium having this marvelous conversation with the judge

because they had both been in the Air Force. It was a very nice conversation, Louis in his brown robe and the judge in his black, on Good Friday. It was a marvelous scene, with a full courthouse.

*That is quite a picture.*

And then the judge started saying some words that I recognized from my sentencing, so I realized that the conversation was over. I stood up, with the intention that when the bailiff came over to tell me to sit down I would, and that when he left I would stand up again. So I stood up, he came over, I sat down, somebody else stood up, he went over there, I stood up, a few other people stood up. Then they started ejecting somebody from the back of the room. And the judge handled it perfectly. He said, *I don't care if they stand up.* And 300 people stood up for the sentencing. And I had people come up to me afterwards and say, *I knew what was going on, I wanted to join you, I couldn't do it until the judge said it was OK, and I still felt empowered.* And that's really one of the goals of our actions at the test site, is letting people discover their empowerment.

After Louis and Gary had been sentenced, Louis was sentenced first, he got sixty days in a halfway house, and he said, *Your Honor, that seems to be less than Erik got.* Louis had been arrested many more times than I had at that point. And the judge said, *Well, I think there's a difference in motive.* Motive was one of the things the [00:40:00] judge strictly forbade me from talking about at the trial, and yet he based my sentence on the fact that I had a different motive than moved these two who had taken religious orders.

My memory is that Louis and Gary started serving their time relatively quickly. They were in a halfway house. They were released during the day to do their work, which was serving the poor, because they were Franciscan monks, friars. And they served coffee and eggs to the day workers in the park near the county jail.

Well, my appeal was denied and I had to surrender shortly thereafter. At that time, the federal authorities did not have overnight accommodations here in Las Vegas, so I surrendered at the federal courthouse. At the end of the day they brought me over to, I think it was the county jail, where I was held for three days in anticipation of being trucked to my eventual federal prison. But on the morning of the third day they said, Get dressed, wait in this room. So I thought, OK, here we go. After a little while they said, All right, you're being released. Here's your papers.

Well, I knew this was not right, but I walked quickly out of the building and walked to the park where Louis and Gary were serving coffee at six in the morning, and got in line with the other folks. They recognized me, of course. There are stories in the Bible of angels opening prison doors, and so all of those stories started being told. It was quite a wonderful time. I had been fasting in jail, which is my practice, and so I had a nice meal. While I was out I called the media. In fact Mary Manning did a nice article in the Las Vegas paper and quoted me when I said, You know, the government responsible for the security of twenty thousand nuclear warheads? Well, they just lost me. So that was nice. And then I called the authorities because we had heard that they were actually looking for me. We had some contacts in the federal system.

I called them early afternoon and I said, I understand you're looking for me.

And they said, Yes, we are.

And I said, Well, I can get down there at four o'clock.

Because I didn't want to spend any more time in their holding cell than necessary, and I knew that shortly after that they would empty it out. Or, I said, you can come get me now.

And they [said], No, four o'clock is fine.

So I re-surrendered at four o'clock and was eventually, during my ninety-day sentence, I got to experience briefly—well, I was put back in county jail for a week. Following that I was bused to Los Angeles, whereupon I was on the Federal Bureau of Prisons airlift, "Con Air," for those who know the movie. flew from L.A. to Phoenix via Portland if memory serves. And after a night in Phoenix, I was flown to El Reno, Oklahoma, which is the hub for the western half of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, or at least was at the time. I had dreaded going to El Reno because there had been a book published which was pretty much a Triple-A guide to the Federal Bureau of Prisons by federal resisters who had spent time there, so that future resisters would know what to expect in the various prisons.

*You don't happen to know the name of that book, do you?*

I don't.

*Just curious.*

It's possible that the folks at Jonah House would still have a copy of that, even though it's twenty years outdated. And El Reno, according to the guide, would be miserable. You would be on cots six inches apart in the gymnasium with rain coming through the open windows. I had already been assigned to a prison camp, so I think that is why I did not experience that. I was [00:45:00] actually in a cell. I was first in a cell with Tony, who was in federal prison for stealing Senator [Dennis] DeConcini's mail. But Tony liked the Federal Bureau of Prisons because they gave him as much Thorazine as he wanted, so he was happy, but not much of a cellmate. And by refusing to mop the floors, I was able to switch cells and ended up rooming with a UC [University of California] Berkeley graduate who could play chess, so I had a little better time in El Reno than I otherwise could have.

And from there, I was flown to Terre Haute, Indiana, where I spent a week before being bused up to the Oxford Prison Camp in Wisconsin. While at Oxford, there had been a nuclear resister in there within memory of most of the other prisoners, Father Jerry Zawada, also a Franciscan, whom I had not met yet. But he had made such a positive influence on the other prisoners that even though he was gone, when they found out what I was in for, they did all they could to make my stay there comfortable in honor of Father Jerry. So that was delightful. They brought me books from home before they read them: *Oh, I just got this book in. I thought you might like to read it.*

*There was a legacy, so to speak.*

Yes. And these were your typical white-collar criminals and some drug guys. There were no other resisters in the camp while I was there.

Anyway, while I was there, I tried to have a woman named Cassandra Dixon put on my visitor list. Cassandra runs a prison ministry house. There's a federal prison camp, a federal prison, and a state prison all in the area, and she provides hospitality to prisoner families. [She] picks them up at the bus or train station, because most of these are poor prisoners from Chicago and their families come up to visit and don't have any resources. So she picks them up, keeps them overnight, feeds them, takes them to visiting hours. And she had offered to be on my visitor list. Of course, she'd been arrested so many times that she couldn't get on my visitor list. But the Catholic chaplain at the prison camp authorized her to come in as a pastoral counselor for me.

*Excellent. [There is] always a way.*

Always a way. So we had a chance to talk. When it came time for my release, they brought me into what's called a counselor. The prisons don't really have counselors. They have people who move you through the system. They don't counsel the prisoners on anything. They move the paperwork along.

And so they asked where I wanted to return to and I said, The bus goes within eight miles of Milan, Minnesota, so why don't you put me on that?

And he said, We can do that, but you have this long layover in Tomah, Wisconsin and then in Minneapolis, so it'll be two days before you get home, unless you're able to catch the five-o'clock-in-the-morning bus from Tomah. But only the warden can authorize that, and he's on vacation.

So when the warden came back, I went in and I said, Here's the situation, I'd like to get out early on my day of release.

And he said, Nobody gets out before eight a.m.

I knew that he had released some of these crooked judges from Chicago early so they could avoid the media. He told me nobody gets out, and so he lied to me. So I went back to my counselor and I said, I've changed my mind. I don't want to be returned to Milan, Minnesota. I want to be returned to my point of conviction, which is the other alternative, Las Vegas, Nevada.

And I heard through the prison grapevine that if you want to go by bus, they give you bus fare, cash. But if you want to go by plane, they give you a ticket, so I said, And I'd like to go by bus.

He did the paperwork and then called me in and said, All right, here's your bus fare. Of course it takes you three days to get here, so here's your per diem.

They gave me, I don't know, eighty dollars a day or something to eat, I don't remember. So I had this wad of cash. And I had arranged for Cassandra Dixon to pick me up at the time of my release, and she drove me to Minneapolis. She was going to visit a priest who was in prison in Minnesota at the time. My father picked me up in the Twin Cities [Minneapolis-St. Paul] and took me home, where I spent a couple days. Then I took the Federal Bureau of Prisons money and drove to Las Vegas for the August action.

[00:50:00] So all of this happened over a two-year period. It was just this delightful circle where everything that I could want to have happen, I think, happened in that two-year period from August to August. And it really awakened the spiritual side of me because there were just way too many coincidences to happen on their own.

*Wow, that's great! Good story. I have so many questions, or thoughts. Starting with the last thing that you just mentioned, that that awoke the spiritual side of you. And you've made references to religion and spirituality a few times. Had you had a strong religious upbringing or background or strong spiritual convictions prior to doing this work, or is it something that was brought out through the work?*

I had been raised as a Lutheran in Minnesota, and I guess had a good grounding in Lutheran Christianity. I went off to college and actually worshiped with the university Lutheran congregation there. And as I said, the world food crisis and related issues were on my mind when I was in college, so I found myself working in various groups related to poverty and hunger and militarism and war and peace. The congregation I was at, these were all issues that they were grappling with.

I don't recall which of my ten years at Stanford it was, but one thing that comes to mind was the Central American refugee movement. There was a hope to have churches provide asylum to Central American refugees who were fleeing governments supported by my government, the United States government, whose military and police forces had done training at the School of the Americas down in Georgia. In fact, as we're giving this interview, Father Louis Vitale is in jail again for protesting outside what was called the School of the Americas. And this congregation I was at, I was probably president of the church council at the time, and the movement was hoping to announce that there were 200 churches, announce this on the

anniversary of Archbishop Romero's assassination, probably by people trained by the United States, to announce on that anniversary date that there were 200 churches willing to provide open asylum to Central American refugees fleeing their repressive governments.

So my congregation was grappling with the issue, and we asked the mundane questions: Well, might we lose our tax-exempt status? If we go to jail, who's going to go to jail? Then somebody said, Can we not do this? And we all looked at each other and no matter what the answers to any of those questions were, of course we could not not do this. That was the kind of congregation it was.

In these other groups I was working with, I kept running into the same people, or people from the same congregations, from the Quakers in the area, from some of the more progressive Protestant churches. And so when I realized that Christianity could be something more than piousness, when I understood that people motivated by their understanding of Christianity could actually be trying to bring justice into the world, it inflamed, I will say, the religious side of me. Let me say the spiritual side, even. A better way to put the two-year cycle I talked about earlier would be awakening the mystical in me.

*What role, if any, does the backdrop of the desert play in that in terms of actions and dealing with the test site, and I guess the larger meaning of the Nevada Test Site, and even the other work that you do?*

It took me an awfully long time to appreciate the desert. I'm from the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes, and although I can appreciate mountains, the desert was harder to recognize the beauty of. [00:55:00] But I eventually got there. It has a certain stillness. There's something about the desert that has called spiritual people through the ages, and I suppose that I awakened to some of that. It's a place of testing, not just of the weapons but of those of us who go out there.

*Just in terms of its terrain and the vastness?*

Yes. I talked about hiking five miles through the cactus in the dark. That's a little bit of a challenge. And it's the temperature extremes. We've been snowed on out there; we've had actions where it's been over a hundred degrees. During early Lent, when I first joined the Franciscans out there, there was a Lenten presence every day at the test site for two or three hours in the morning as the workers were coming in, so the commitment to drive out and stand in the cold wind for three hours in the morning. But I've had some great solitary actions out there, as well.

In my more recent actions, I've become annoyed that they will detain us but not prosecute us, so I have done everything from refusing to leave the cage and making them—sometimes I refuse to go in. So if they carry me into the cage, I almost always make them carry me out. If you really want me in that cage, and then you don't want to do anything with me, you really have to carry me out.

Once upon a time, I locked myself in the Porta-Potty and said, I'm tired of this. I will come out when you bring the magistrate to see me. Every couple hours, they would come see if I was ready to leave, and I'd repeat the message, and so they eventually sprung the door open. I thought they were going to tip it over. I had visions of this blue water coming all over me and wondering what I'd gotten myself into now. And I had sent all my support people away for that action. I said, I don't know where this is going to go, so feel free to leave and I'll deal with things. Because of that, what happened when they finally took me out is the Nye County deputy who was the verbally least appreciative of my actions, would tell other folks that it was a good thing he was wearing a badge with that gun because if he didn't have the badge on, that Erik Thompson would be in trouble.

I didn't know where they were going to take me afterwards. They opened the Porta-Potty, I wasn't walking, they threw me in the back of a squad car, and I thought he was just going to drop me off a half-mile away. And he went past the turn.

And I said, Where are you taking me?

And he said, Indian Springs.

And I said, In that case, I'd prefer to have my seatbelt on.

What I actually preferred was that I wasn't crumpled up in a heap in the back of the car, but I figured the deputy would respond to a seatbelt request. So he stopped and situated me, drove me to Indian Springs, told me the bus schedule, asked if I had enough cash to get on the bus.

He had this chance to be a real human being, which is one of the other things that we do out there. In addition to letting people find their own power, it's giving the opponents a chance to find their humanity. We recognize that our group is probably not going to close down the test site, but in the process of doing these things, we are changing ourselves and we hope we are changing some of the people with whom we have contact, whether it's the arrestees, the court officers, the jailers, the media we deal with, our supporters back home, or our neighbors back home who weren't our supporters before we went in but recognize a little bit of the injustice that frequently results.

*One of the things that comes up often is the relationship that Nevada Desert Experience had, and some of the other groups, with the authorities out there, particularly with Jim Merlino and his folks. I'm wondering if you could talk about that? I think you briefly touched on it, but it seems to be fairly unique [01:00:00] and part of this history of actions at the test site—the relationship*

*that you guys had with the authorities; perhaps even something that shaped the way actions have been done.*

Yes, part of the covenant for our action is that we will inform the authorities. Sometimes we interpret that a little differently. When three of us went down to the chapel to get the federal charges, we knew we'd only be able to do that if we didn't tell the authorities we were going to show up at the chapel at eight o'clock in the morning. But the authorities were told there will be an action at the test site on this day. So we have respected their desires to do their work, although we challenge them frequently, you know, you don't have to do this, either be in this job or do this arrest, or you can choose to enforce the law, because what's going on at the test site is illegal. They have so far refused to buy those arguments.

But we have had a good relationship with them. They get frustrated with us occasionally if we do something outside the ordinary, and we're prepared for that. There seems to be a certain mindset that people who go into law enforcement frequently have, not all of them but it's noticeable, sort of a macho attitude. I'm thinking of one event when it was just a woman and I arrested, and so I was in the men's side of the cage and she was in the woman's side. We had agreed that we would attempt to stay on the test site that day, and so they came in to release me and I said, I'm not ready to go. I think I'll just stay here. After a number of times doing that, they came in in force, so I knew they were going to carry me out. And I, as I always do, apologized that I can't participate in this but I hope they'll have enough people so none of them have to strain. So they had four people. One of them was a woman, and she lost my leg during the process, and so now there were just three of them.

And she said, Just a minute and I'll pick it up.

And the guy in charge said, No, we'll just drag him from here.

And so, [that] is putting strain on them and I realize that that's always a possibility, so I'm prepared for it. I didn't know that they were—and I'm telling them, I'm not going anywhere. You can bring a car down and put me in the car and drive me away, if you want. Nope, going to drag me out. But when they went to pick up the woman, who weighed half of what I did, they negotiated with her, and they eventually drove a pickup into the cage and put her in the back of the pickup.

*So there was definitely a difference in treatment and the way they interacted.*

Well, it's just that they had gone through one and said, well, this isn't really working [laughing]. But give them a chance to be human. It took them one try to get it right. You had a question that I probably wandered away from there. Oh, the treatment with the authorities.

*I guess I'm just wondering if that's accurate, if you would say that they perhaps shaped the way that actions have been done out at the test site and even with civil disobedience.*

One of the benefits, as most people see it, of civil resistance at the Nevada Test Site is that the likelihood of substantial consequences are minimal. I don't necessarily see that as a benefit, but there are many people whose first act of resistance is at the test site, because that's the step they can make.

*And so that's likely to be more appealing than, say, being arrested and spending hard time in jail.*

Yes, or even the uncertainty of it. It's not a certainty; it never is. If you can't do the time, don't do the crime. But the high probability is that an action at the Nevada Test Site will be done in two hours, whereas other places, you might be in communication with the court for months before charges are dropped, or charges might not be dropped, or you may or may not get probation. And so we see it as part of our task in the training of a new generation of resisters to provide this opportunity. And you know the new generation of resisters could be sixty-five-year-

[01:05:00] old grandmothers. I love getting arrested with grandmothers and nuns. There's just something special about it. So we offer that possibility, and frequently our actions, when we have a group, including people who are not regulars at the test site, is to do the standard choreographed arrest so that the expectations are not changed. Those of us who wish to risk a little more aggressive interaction with the authorities will do like the woman and I did, go back on Monday, after the weekend.

*It's interesting.*

I actually was one of the last people to be prosecuted out there. In August of 2001, I was arrested while being on the wrong side of the fence, not down by the gate. We were having a worship service through the fence, not recognizing the boundary that the authorities had put up. Some people were on one side and I was on the other.

*I'm trying to get a picture of it.*

There were actually two of us on the wrong side of the fence. The Nye County captain in charge, Mike Bordner, who also recently died, actually drove his car from his warm spot up to us, or cool spot, I guess, in August, and then walked over to where we were and said that if we didn't cross back over, we'd be arrested. And I had made the commitment during that August Desert Witness to be on the test site. I had slept on the test site that night. I wasn't willing to leave.

And he said, All right, you're under arrest. Come on over here and get in the car.

And I said, I really don't want to leave the test site today. I will walk to the cage.

And there was a Wackenhut there to accompany me. So I walked to the cage, and refused release three or four times, and then thought I would try something else. My promise to myself was that I would not, of my own energy, leave the test site. I told Mike, the captain, that if they

brought a car over, I would get in the car and he could transport me. I knew that “transport” is a magic word for the authorities.

[They said], Well, if we transport you, it's going to be to Beatty.

And I said, Whatever. If you bring the car over, I'll get in it. It's up to you.

And they brought a car over and I got in it and they transported me to Beatty. So I had a chance to spend an hour with the same deputy who doesn't like me, who drove me to Indian Springs. At deputy speeds, it's about fifty minutes from the test site to Beatty, so I got forty-eight minutes of monologue and I think I said about nine words in response to something. But I got his life story on the way up.

I refused release at the jail multiple times, because I wanted to appear before a judge. That's why I locked myself in the Porta-Potty earlier. So I finally got to see a judge. Judge Sullivan was sick at the time and so the neighboring justices of the peace were filling in for him. No, not at that point. So he gave me a trial date, which I needed to change later, and the court was accommodative.

In October of '01, I went to trial, so I was arrested before 9/11 and tried after 9/11. Captain Mike was there to testify against me, and the Wackenhut guy. And there was a woman judge from Esmeralda Township. And I was surprised. She let me say everything that I had wanted to say, which surprised me. I was trying to lay the groundwork for a selective prosecution defense.

*I'm sorry, I just need to switch out the disc.*

[01:09:23] End Track 2, Disc 1.

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

*OK, sorry for the interruption.*

No problem. In August of 2001, I appeared in court. The judge was a woman judge from Esmeralda Township. She let me say everything that I had wanted to say, which surprised me, and the prosecutor didn't object. In fact, I should say that I got to court an hour ahead of time. The prosecutor was already there. Captain Mike was there and the Wackenhut guy was there.

The prosecutor came up to me before the trial and said, I suppose you want to have your day in court.

And I said, Well, I could've accepted a citation anywhere along the line and not be here today.

And he said, Yeah, but you didn't do that, and here you are.

And I said, That's right, here I am. But I'll listen to what you have to say.

And he said, How about you plead guilty to a public nuisance charge and pay a two-hundred-dollar fine?

And I said, I don't think that's going to cut it.

So we went to trial. It took about an hour. As I said, she let me say everything that I had wanted to say. I was trying to lay the groundwork for a selective prosecution defense, so I was asking Captain Mike about how many people had been arrested this year and how many of them had been charged, et cetera. And the judge could not believe that there were arrests happening, but no legal consequences. [She said], You know, in my township, they'd go to jail, or go to trial.

But such as it was, we had the trial. And of course I was on the wrong side of the line, and so she found me guilty. She sentenced me to I believe a fifty-dollar fine.

And I said, Your Honor, is there any way I could do jail time instead of serving?

She said, No, that just costs the county more money. Twenty-five dollars is a state-mandated fee I can't do anything about. So she says to me, How about twenty-five dollars and ten hours of community service?

And I said, That sounds OK, and I can serve that with any 501(c)(3) organization, any registered charity?

And she said, That'll work.

So I paid my twenty-five-dollar fine and I worked ten hours fundraising for Nevada Desert Experience and raised about a thousand dollars. I guess that they showed me.

*Putting it back into the business, so to speak.*

Because that was the first prosecution in a while, I actually got some good press in the Las Vegas alternative media, as well. Kate Silver of whichever publication, the *Mercury*, the *Weekly*, something [Las Vegas Life].

Oh, and in my statement to that judge, I said, The country's calling for heroes. This was after 9/11. And I said to the judge, You have the opportunity here to be a hero. You have the opportunity to say that Nye County will not be used to create weapons of mass destruction used to terrorize the world. Well, she didn't specifically do that, but I don't think that the fifty-dollar fine was excessive and certainly her willingness to negotiate on the back end of that sentence suggested that she realized that there was good reason to make the arguments we were making.

*Do you think that, for the most part, when you talk to folks, they understand where you're coming from or what the philosophies are behind it, behind your beliefs and convictions?*

*Because you deal with first the authorities at the test site, and then you have a chance to speak with the judges.*

That's a hard call. There's different audiences for our work out there. And a big part of the audience is the folks back home, to make them aware of the fact that we know where the weapons of mass destruction are: They're here. And we know which government is controlling them: We are. We know which government is largely responsible for hindering the development of true nuclear disarmament around the world: We are. It was easier making those arguments while we were still doing actual critical testing, which we haven't done for thirteen [00:05:00] years or so now, fourteen probably. People don't believe we are still developing a new generation of nuclear weapons that we are willing to use at some point. It's not just so the military contractors can make money. The weapons we have now actually cannot be used because they're just too nasty and too messy, and the military leaders know that. But if they had smaller, cleaner, newer, more powerful weapons, they maybe would use them. And that's what we believe we're working to develop out there.

*And we just recently conducted a test out at the test site.*

Yes, they still conduct what are called subcritical tests. They do use nuclear materials, but not enough to create a critical chain reaction. The government calls this the stockpile stewardship program, meaning we have to make sure that the weapons we have remain safe and usable. We believe that they are in fact using these tests to calibrate equipment to develop a new generation of weapons, and be able to use equipment rather than full-scale testing to develop those weapons. It's hard to believe the government would lie to us, but we're open to that possibility.

*You've been pretty active in this for quite some time now and I'm just wondering what your family thinks of the work that you do and whether or not they've been supportive of the various actions that you've participated in over the years, beginning with your time back at Stanford.*

I don't think my parents were really all that keen on what I was doing. My father apparently would tell other people it was OK what I was doing, but wouldn't tell me that. He would accuse me of running around the world and doing good, thought that I should get a Stanford MBA-type job and buy him a house in Hawaii, which I understand that desire, as well. I have one sibling, and I guess we haven't really talked too much about it. It's just part of who I am for so long, you don't need to talk about it.

*Is your sibling older or younger?*

Younger. She lives in Europe.

*That's quite a divergent path from a Stanford MBA program to peace activist.*

Well, I wasn't exactly on the Fortune 500 track at Stanford. I'd already been in the Peace Corps at the time. I was getting credentialed, really. While I was working on my MBA, I was a teaching assistant in the first Peace Studies class taught at Stanford. And I got a certificate in Public Management, in addition to my MBA, which deals with management of nonprofits and government agencies.

*What pushed you toward the MBA side of things? I know you said you had an interest in economics and politics.*

It was mostly to get a credential. It's the only business school I applied to. I did a good job on the test and so I said, well, if I get in, I'll go; if I don't, I won't. And I got in. It allowed me to spend more time at Stanford, where I had plenty of connections at that point. And I learned some management skills which came in useful. My father was killed in a car accident in '92 and I went back to take over the family business and I was prepared to do that, where I wouldn't have been, perhaps, if I had only been running around the world and doing good.

*I don't mean to skip around at all, but I've just been jotting down a few notes as you've been talking. [Sister] Rosemary Lynch, somebody who you've worked with a bit?*

Yes, Rosemary was quite involved in the Nevada Desert Experience stuff when I first started coming out. After Pace e Bene was formed, she seemed to spend more time there. She's a world-requested speaker and so she leaves the country frequently. But I don't know if Rosemary even weighs ninety pounds, but is just such a powerful and gentle person. I've only met a few people who have been able to combine both the power and the gentleness to the degree that she has. In fact, the only other one that comes to mind as I'm sitting here is also a nun, Sister [00:10:00] Ardeth Platt who I think was just released from prison where she spent I'm thinking it was eighty-four months. If she isn't out, she's soon to be released. But something these women have been able to develop which allows them to speak truth to power from a sense of groundedness and knowing who they are and their place in the universe.

*It's pretty amazing.*

It is.

*You were the director of NDE at one point, weren't you?*

I was, and in fact still am for a few months yet, co-chair.

*How did that come about?*

After being involved long enough, I was asked to join the board. They probably asked me earlier. I guess after enough times being asked, I relented and joined the board.

*What year was this?*

Oh, I'm guessing mid-to-late-nineties. Then a few years ago, we decided to go with co-chair people on the board. I was willing to have half or less of the responsibility, and the other co-chair was willing to take more than half of the responsibility, so that worked well for us.

But we continued to struggle financially. As I said, since the end of obvious testing, where they had to tell folks in Las Vegas to watch out on the high rises, it's been hard to—and the U.S. declared a moratorium, so even activists believe that the government doesn't do any type of nuclear testing, because we declared a moratorium. So since that time, it's been harder to get people to show up for events, and it's been harder to raise money. Of course, when there are these other demands on people's money, like following 9/11 or following the hurricanes this last year, we struggle. So sometimes we have a quarter-of-a-person paid staff and sometimes we're able to get pretty close to two full paid staff positions. But we're limping along and you know as long as we can meet a need and people are willing to give us the resources to do that, I guess we'll be around. And if either of those events stop being true, we'll probably go out of existence like many of the other organizations have. But we've been around twenty-five years now, which is long for an organization like this.

*Yes, and that's something that I'm curious about because the longevity is really pretty amazing in that respect. And you still have involvement with what you might want to call core people who have been involved, you know, informally since the late seventies or early eighties, and then of course the formal inception of NDE. But I think that's really amazing. What, in your opinion, accounts for the longevity and continual involvement, as opposed to maybe the American Peace Test or parts of Greenpeace or something like that?*

Part of it is probably the fact that Nevada Desert Experience is all about faith-based resistance, so almost all of the people who participate with us are motivated by some deep passion which we call faith. And when there are slow periods when we seem to be short of victories, it's that type of groundedness that can get us through. And the other thing is probably that the Nevada Test Site is, as near as we can tell, the most bombed area on Earth. Archbishop Dom Helder Camara

of Brazil had said that this is the site of the greatest violence in the world. It continues to present itself to us in that manner, by continued testing, by plans to develop the Yucca Mountain waste storage facility, by the fact that the government does other things out at the test site; it's not just nuclear testing. The Stealth fighters were developed out there for five years before anybody knew about them. In fact, we had an action at the north end of the test site after the first Iraq War started to make the connections between what goes on at the test site and the fact that those were the planes being used to bomb Iraq the first time. So it's a combination of [00:15:00] what's driving the people who participate with us, and then the focus of our action. The evil that's represented there is strong enough, between the two of them, to keep us going.

*It seems that there's an ebb and flow. What's your sense of that? I mean you've been involved for a long time now and I'm wondering if you think that there's, particularly with the circumstances that we're in now, the political circumstances, has there been a, I don't want to say a renewed interest, but has the momentum been picking up again? Do you think this is something that's popping up onto people's, conscious radars again?*

It does not seem to be any easier to get large numbers of people motivated about nuclear weapons issues. Part of it is, there are other peace and justice issues that seem more immediate and compelling, and in fact I would guess that almost everyone who participates with us is also participating in other things to stop the war in Iraq, to deal with the death penalty, to fight poverty. You know, there's a whole range of things that people are involved with. The School of the Americas Watch has done a wonderful job on mobilizing large numbers of young people to go down to Georgia every year. I believe there were nineteen thousand people at the last action, including lots and lots of college people. I believe that every Jesuit college in the United States

sent people down there. It was to remember, among other things, Jesuits who were killed by people trained by my government.

So it's not that people are unwilling to respond to injustices committed by the United States government, but the Nevada Test Site doesn't seem to be a high focus. And of course, there are other nuclear facilities that get people's attention, as well. There are actions in Los Alamos and Livermore and Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

*And are these, in your mind, all networked or linked?*

We cooperate sometimes. There are certain days of the year that are important to all of us, like the bombing days. There are other days that are specific to us, like Lent is a time of faith-based resistance, and we are taping this during Lent. We just had an action on Ash Wednesday, a few days ago. So we're connected and we get each other's newsletters and advertise for each other, and we have supporters who support all the organizations. We try to organize things to have the most impact, if we're able to do that.

*[In] your history or your experience of doing this, a little bit like what we were talking about at the very beginning of the interview, from where you began and where you are now, has the meaning of this changed for you?*

Yes. I don't know that I've ever tried to express this before, so I may have to hit "undo" at the end of this. But I think when I started, I was aware of the injustice being done in the Pacific, that had been done with the bombing of the Marshall Islands, which was being done as the U.S. tried to get the Republic of Palau to amend its nuclear-free constitution. The U.S. forced seven constitutional referenda out there, until the Palauans—there were probably less than twenty thousand of them at the time, and the U.S. was offering large numbers of dollars. It took seven

elections before the U.S. forced them, basically, to give up the nuclear-free clause in their constitution so they could get the money.

When I started, and the MX missile was being tested, I was hopeful that we could stop some of this stuff. I believe that it was when people went out in the streets that ended our involvement in Vietnam, and I believe we could do that again. Well, it doesn't seem to be [00:20:00] happening, either because the people don't go out in the streets, although they did for Iraq II, or that the government doesn't care as much as it did then. And I don't know what it is.

So I moved from actually trying to change government policy. Perhaps in the middle period I was more concerned about being faithful to what we are called to be in this world, and helping others experience that sense. Dorothy Day, I believe, has said we're not called to be effective; we're called to be faithful. Or maybe that was Mother Teresa. I'm not sure. And so there was some sense of that. OK, I'm going to give up effectiveness and settle for, if you will, faithfulness.

Partly as a result of my opening to the mystical through my action at the test site and other events that have occurred in my life, I am moving now more toward a sense of that my presence and my work at the test site is part of a larger sense of global healing. In fact, the Ash Wednesday service we had a few days ago was a healing service. Now, this all seems to be on the same continuum to me, but I could make the case that I've changed my focus.

*Well, you change throughout the years, so it makes sense that things would shift. Which leads me to, you just mentioned that you didn't know if it was possible to make change, perhaps like we used to, for example, taking to the streets during the Vietnam War. Do you think the way that we've done things, particularly in the way of protest or peace actions, have changed? And then I guess, along those same lines, do you see the way Nevada Desert Experience does things, as*

*opposed to the early eighties when you began and now, do you think that that's changed? Or that it is still an effective way to do things?*

I don't think that NDE has changed too much. We recognize that our purpose is to bring a faith-based witness to the evil at the test site, to encourage others who are on that journey, and to try to educate the people with whom we have contact about what the truth is. I think that has pretty much stayed the same.

In terms of protests in the larger society, part of it is that we've become more comfortable, so we have more to give up. And part of it, especially after 9/11, is we've become more fearful. There definitely are people who are experiencing the brunt of the force of the United States government who probably haven't done much, and what's to keep that power from coming down on me if I am to raise my head? Which is, I think, the attitude the government would like people to have.

I trace a lot of my activism back to the Berrigan brothers. Phil died just a couple of years ago. He continued to risk arrest into his seventies, I think.

And I'm told that his family said, Dad, when are you going to stop? Dad, it's time to stop.

And he said, When somebody else starts, I'll stop.

So after a lifetime of resisting evil, he felt that there weren't nearly enough people who were willing to take his place.

His brother Dan wrote something very poetic and prophetic which I'm not able to quote at length, but something on the order of, We who want peace want it with half a heart and half a life and half a will, and those who want war want it completely. And as long as that's the case, we'll continue to have war.

And I think that's the problem. We only want peace with half a will.

**[00:25:00]** *It's interesting because I've spoken with folks who have worked at the test site and I've actually talked to Jim Merlino and some folks that were involved with Wackenhut, but when they talk about the test site, they look at it as a peace endeavor. That seems to be the opposite way that other people, such as yourself, might conceive that.*

That's a good point, and I enjoy words. Sometimes when I am around people like the deputies, I try to understand whether they are peace officers or law enforcement officers. And I'm willing to work with both of those and help them see a different way to define how that position might respond in the face of the evil that's happening around them.

An easy way out is to say that people of good will disagree on the way to get to peace. I think that the more one knows, the less disagreement there is. People think we need nuclear weapons because they ended World War II. Well, I'm not convinced of that. When we dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, the Soviet Union had not even declared war on Japan yet. They were about to. Maybe that would've been enough to get Japan to surrender. Maybe we could've dropped the bomb on an uninhabited island and said: Look what we can do. Don't you want to surrender?

We could have accepted something less than total surrender. The Japanese were willing to surrender prior to this point, but they wanted to retain the Emperor. We could have saved a quarter-million people by letting the Emperor have some power. There were other ways to end World War II. So if I believe that my government is not ignorant, all I can think of is that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the second and third nuclear tests conducted by the United States, and they vaporized a quarter-million people in those tests.

So I think the more people know—in that one instance, we wouldn't have needed them for that. If we can find the resources, if people want to know, people have to be open to changing

their mind. People have been taught certain things and have built their lives around them, in some instances, so it's very hard for them to go through the cognitive dissonance of reevaluating everything they've stood for up to this point. I'm pleased there are conflict-resolution programs going on in so many schools now, so that different models are taught to children before they lock themselves in on a conflict-nonresolution model.

*I think this might be a good place to wrap up, and I think we've reached our time frame. I know you've got things to do. I'm just wondering if there's anything that we haven't talked about that you feel is important to your story or you'd like to articulate.*

If there's anything else, it might be, I think when we started, we were hoping to shut the test site down, and I think through the years we actually moved toward a conversion mentality, which also has a nice religious symbolism to it. Well, we now have a very large chunk of contaminated land which is good for minimal things. So I think an emphasis needs to be put on, rather than shut it down, how to convert this to something that will be useful. There's Homeland Security [DHS] testing going on out there at the moment. May or may not be a good thing. I haven't decided yet. I suppose that if our first responders need to do live chemical weapons testing, there's probably no better place to do it. But it seems a shame to continually insult the test site in that way. But there are positive things that everybody could agree would be positive. Solar energy research comes immediately to mind out there. I'm hopeful [00:30:00] that our efforts toward conversion of ourselves and the test site will be effective, not just faithful.

*Thank you. I definitely appreciate you taking the time this morning.*

Glad to do it.

[00:30:17] End Track 2, Disc 2.

[End of interview]