

From Conscientious Objection to Resistance to Peace: USA to Mozambique and Beyond

Matt Meyer – U.S.A.

Growing up in the 1960's, with images of the US war in Vietnam and Southeast Asia playing out on the television screen as full color background to my earliest memories, I often note that my parents were "natural born pacifists." Neither of them belonged to any peace groups or attended demonstrations, but the idea that "war was wrong" permeated our household. In 1979, when US President Jimmy Carter suggested bringing back registration for the draft as a show of strength in the face of Soviet incursions to Afghanistan, my own high school senior mentality drove these anti-war instincts into high gear. As editor of my school's student newspaper, I went about looking for any organization I could find to inform my fellow 17 and 18-year-olds what we were facing as the first step of an all-out draft returned. Receiving a thick envelope of materials in the mail from the Central Committee on Conscientious Objection and visiting the War Resisters League (WRL) national office in downtown Manhattan were this Brooklyn boy's first direct forays into the movement for nonviolent social change.

At WRL, I met some of the historic World War Two conscientious objectors whose histories were already somewhat legendary. Jim Peck, who was likely the most-beaten white man in the Black freedom struggle, was the greeter at the WRL door those days, relating stories of his involvement from the first Journey of Reconciliation freedom ride in 1947 to the present. Ralph DiGia and Igal Roodenko were office stalwarts, and their prison buddies Bayard Rustin and Bill Sutherland were not far away from the circle of friends I was to meet in the ensuing years. By 1985, I was elected the youngest National Chairperson in the history of WRL, and another of those I met was a young woman on our Executive Committee: FOR-USA's staff person Jo Becker. It seemed only fair that, if Jo was committing all this time to WRL, the least I could do was join FOR, and our life-long friendship developed. She went on to serve as FOR Executive Director for a time, before becoming a leading staff person for Human Rights Watch and noted author, one of the world's foremost authorities on child soldiers.

These aspects of my “C.O.” stories from early in my political life are not only significant because of the enrichment I received from the relationships with all those mentioned. It’s not even significant because—within my first years as an activist—I was able to “boo” the President’s draft registration policies live (in front of a million-person television audience) at the Democratic National Convention or gain notoriety as a media savvy public draft resister. Perhaps the most significant take-away I reflect upon now parallels Jo Becker’s path regarding the importance of a “youth peace” culture and politics. My academic and professional pursuits were steeped in contemporary African history and my political inclinations understood anti-imperialist and solidarity work as equal counterparts to traditional peace and disarmament pursuits. The work of Mozambican leader Graca Machel, therefore, took on special significance to me.

Before becoming “Mrs. Nelson Mandela,” Graca Machel was herself a young militant of her country’s national liberation struggle. After independence, she served as Mozambique’s Minister of Education and was First Lady to founding president Samora Machel. Decades later, as UNICEF’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Graca Machel reported that more and more of the world had become a “moral vacuum” in which “children are slaughtered, raped and maimed... exploited as soldiers... starved and exposed to extreme brutality.” Declaring children as “zones of peace,” she argued, would allow us to “recapture our instinct to nurture and protect children.” For me, these words ring loudly true—even forty years on as an agitator for justice and peace. There is a distinct and direct line from conscientious objection to total resistance to viewing children and youth as protected peace “spaces.” Person by person, community by community, we must build our beloved nonviolent fellowships.