

An afternoon at Giuliani's Campaign Headquarters and a night in the Polk County Jail

Seasons of Discontent: a Presidential Occupation Project – Des Moines, Iowa – November 7-9, 2007

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The planning

I drove from my home in Madison to Des Moines Iowa on Wednesday November 7, 2007 to participate in the kickoff of Seasons of Discontent: a Presidential Occupation Project (SODaPOP), organized by Voices for Creative Nonviolence and the Catholic Worker Community in Des Moines. SODaPOP is a campaign to use civil resistance, occupying the campaign headquarters of presidential candidates who will not commit to concrete plans to bring an immediate end to the war and occupation of Iraq. SODaPOP started in Iowa because it is the first state to begin the process of determining who our presidential candidates will be during the January caucuses. All the candidates currently have active campaigns in Iowa, and the media is closely watching what is happening.

In a way, this is really two separate but connected stories. There is the story of the action, occupying the campaign headquarters of presidential candidates. This is an important action to be a part of because it is really scary to think about who will be elected president in 2008. We don't have any lead-

Bob Braam, Chris Gaunt, and Joy First hold a banner at a rally the morning of November 8.



ing candidates, either Democrat or Republican, willing to take a strong stand against the war and occupation in Iraq, and who will pledge to bring the war

and occupation to an end.

So we must put this issue out there and force the candidates to look at it, force the American people to see that our current leading presidential candidates talk about continuing the war and occupation of Iraq for several more years.

The other story is the story of my time in jail. After being arrested about 17 times since the war began in 2003, this was the first time I spent a night in jail. It was a grueling experience, but also one where I learned a great deal about the injustice of our prison system. I came out of there exhausted and heavy-hearted, but also renewed to continue the struggle for social justice.

A group of about 25 gathered on Wednesday night to listen to a presentation by Kathy Kelly and to begin to plan our action for Thursday. Kathy's talk was inspiring. She began by saying that people always say that she is on the fringe, but, it is good to be on the fringe when you look at where our country is going. She talked about how

Joy First, 53, is a grandmother from Madison Wisconsin and was one of the ten people who were arrested after occupying Rudy Giuliani's campaign headquarters in Des Moines, Iowa, on November 8, 2007. (Eight others were arrested in Hillary Clinton's Des Moines campaign office later the same day.) This is Joy's account of her experience.

taking risks for peace is necessary.

We began to make plans for Thursday's action. A rally was planned for 12:30 in downtown Des Moines on Thursday. After the rally, we would go to the presidential candidate's headquarters. We discussed the pros and cons of doing an action at various offices, and we decided that one group would go to Clinton's headquarters and another group would go to Giuliani's headquarters because they are the national frontrunners in the two major parties and they are also the most hawkish of the top candidates. We began to plan our strategy.

About 10:00 pm we went back to the Catholic Worker house where about 10 of us from out of town bedded down on comfy mattresses in a big attic room. I was feeling anxious about the action the next day. I didn't know anyone there really well, and it was challenging risking arrest without feeling connected to someone else. On the other hand, everyone there was so warm and welcoming and I knew I was with a group of committed and caring people. Kathy's talk earlier was very inspiring and this was where I needed to be and I was doing what I needed to be doing.

The next morning, we met again and firmed up our plans for the action. Sally, an attorney in Des Moines who provides a lot of free help to those doing civil resistance, talked to us about the legal ramifications. I soon realized that with the way things happen in Des Moines, it was very likely that I would be spending the night in jail. After Sally left, the group all strongly agreed that none of us would sign any citations from the police on Thursday, but would risk being put in jail for the night. We agreed to this action of solidarity because the police often offer a citation and release to local people, but tend to

hold people from out of town overnight. We were also concerned because our actions have been minimized in the past when we are cited and released the same day.

The action

At about 12:30 we went downtown to participate in a rally for peace that is held there on a weekly basis. There were about 30 people at the rally. We then split up and about half went to Giuliani's headquarters and half went to Clinton's headquarters. We had some excellent support people with our group, and so even though I didn't know them very well, I knew we would be taken care of. I always remember Attorney Mark Goldstone telling us before an action in DC that when we are in jail and feeling really alone and abandoned, just remember that there are people on the outside who have our back. Thinking about the good people from Des Moines who would have my back if I was arrested comforted me as we drove to Giuliani's campaign headquarters.

About 15 people went to Giuliani's headquarters. Ten would be risking arrest and five were there in support. An equal number went to Clinton's headquarters. The plan in Giuliani's office was to start by talking to his staff and assuring them that we were there to bring a message of peace. We pledged to act nonviolently in this action, following the principles of King and Gandhi. Farah delivered this message to the staff when we arrived. The next step was to knock on the office doors or the desk of staff, sharing with them pictures of the Iraqi people who are suffering so immensely as a result of our occupation of their country. Depending on their response, we would then read names of Iraqis and US sol-

diers who have been killed in the occupation.

We began our plan as Farah talked to the campaign manager and asked her again if Giuliani would sign the pledge to end the war. Farah noted that a pledge had been sent to Giuliani to sign about a month ago and we had not heard anything back from him. The manager made it clear from the beginning that we were not welcome there. We continued with our plan, sharing our pictures of Iraqis with staff. We were not getting a very warm reception from Giuliani's staff and we decided to sit in a semi-circle and begin to read names of those who have died in this brutal war. After each name was read, we sang "We remember you." It is always a powerful and moving action to read the names of so many innocent people who have lost their lives because of our illegal and immoral actions. We must continue to remember the human cost of this war and occupation and do everything we can to bring it to an immediate end.

The office manager begged us to leave. She was getting upset and teary-eyed as she asked us to leave. The police had been called and were waiting to see what would happen. Giuliani's headquarters was in a Clive, a suburb of Des Moines and I don't think the Clive police force had a lot of experience with peace activists. We politely told her that we had to remain in the office as we continued to call for Giuliani to pledge to end the war and occupation.

We continued to read names for about 45 minutes I think. The police asked us to leave and told us they didn't want to arrest us and be the bad guys. We again said that we were committed to remaining in the office. Eventually, Giuliani's office manager was in tears

and pleading with us to leave. But we were there calling for peace and we could not leave. At that point, maybe about 3:00, they began arresting the ten people who refused to leave the office. We were handcuffed and transported to the Clive police station.

Eventually eight people were arrested at Clinton's office, but the arrests there took place much later in the day. As agreed, all those arrested at Clinton's office refused to sign the citation. Some did not provide the police with identification, however, the eight were all released that evening.

Back at the Clive jail, we were charged with trespassing and told that we would be released if we posted \$300 in bail. We all refused to post bail and we were transported to the Polk County jail to spend the night there, again in handcuffs. I think one of the men arrested at Giuliani's office who is from Des Moines may have been released at that time. The women and men were separated and transported separately.

A night in the Polk County Jail
I've been arrested about 16 times, but this was the first time I have been held overnight. It is difficult to describe what it does to you to spend a night in jail. I felt totally powerless, because I was totally powerless. I also lost all sense of myself as a person with any value and the belief that anyone cared about me. It is an incredibly dehumanizing experience, and also a critical experience in understanding the plight of so many people in our society who spend time in jail.

I was given an orange jumpsuit, green underpants, and a green t-shirt and told to change my clothes. The guard then gave me socks and plastic sandals for my feet. I was locked in a small hallway that had three cells com-

ing off it, with several other women. I was relieved when I was joined by Kathy Kelly and Suzanne Sheridan, who were both arrested with me in Giuliani's office. We were given dinner, and I ate a piece of bread and some canned peaches. The rest was inedible. The other inmates were very talkative and friendly. We soon found out that two of them were in this isolated area to keep them away from other prisoners because they didn't get along. One of them really talked a lot and we found out she was a meth addict who sometimes carried a gun on the outside.

You kind of lose your sense of time in jail. I think after an hour or so, I was taken along with Kathy, Suzanne, and five women we had just met to a big holding cell. The eight of us spent the night together, with a few other women coming and going over that period of time. It was a concrete room with a built-in concrete bench along two walls and a metal toilet in the corner behind a short barrier. One wall was all glass so the guards had a good view of what was going on. The cell was meant to be a temporary holding cell, but we were told by some of the women with us that because the jail is so crowded, some people spend up to four days there. That is unbelievable.

Over time, Kathy, Suzanne and I developed a close camaraderie with three of the other women who were with us. The other two women slept most of the time. One of them seemed pretty drugged up and received more medication from the jail nurse which seemed to keep her pretty dopey. I think four of them were meth addicts and it sounded like they were in and out of jail frequently. Their crimes were related to their meth addictions and they were not getting the help they needed. The fifth woman was there for four days for a

second DWI. Some of them were going to be there for a long time, and it was very sad to hear their stories. The only way to pass the time was to share our stories, and we did, and we learned a lot.

It seemed like the guards did not want to make us comfortable. We could only ask for help from the guards when they chose to come to our cell for a reason. The guards came to our cell every couple of hours or every five minutes, we never knew when we would get a chance to talk to them. We were all new at the jail and so the guards came to take us out and book us one by one and return us to the cell.

We had two phones in our cell that we could use to make collect calls. Neither one worked. One woman was desperate to call her family. Each time a guard came to our cell, we asked about the phones and they said they would try to look into it. Then they went away and did nothing about the phones. We could see the men in holding cells across the hallway and they were able to use their phones. It was very frustrating.

It was very difficult to use the toilet without any privacy, just another one of the dehumanizing experiences of being there. There was a stack of sanitary napkins beside the toilet and one woman took a few and was holding onto them. She showed us how valuable they can be. A couple of them can be stacked up for a pillow, they can be used for an eye mask because the bright lights are on all night, used as ear plugs, rolled up into a tampon, and used as a hanger (that was one I didn't really get). Unfortunately for the men, they didn't have this valuable resource in their cells.

Cold air was blowing in through a vent

in the ceiling and we told the guards we were freezing many times, but nothing changed. Supposedly, the guards were supposed to bring us blankets at 10:00 pm, but time kept passing and they did not bring us blankets. Every time we asked about it, they said they didn't have any for us. We saw the men huddled in their blankets across the hall.

I was getting very tired, but knew I could not even think about going to sleep until I was booked and had a blanket. At 12:30 am, they finally took me out of the cell to book me. I asked the officer if we could have blankets. He said they were waiting for them to come back from the laundry. Being out of the cell, I could see a stack of blankets sitting on a desk and I pointed them out to the officer. I also asked about the phone and the officer said he would turn on the switch for our phone, and he did. The phone was working when I got back to the cell. All it took was flipping a switch, but the guards refused to do it until then.

We also got blankets and tried to settle in for the short night. I put my plastic sandals one on top of the other, and put two sanitary napkins on top of that for a pillow. I lay down on the concrete floor wrapped in my thin blanket. Though I was exhausted, I couldn't sleep. My emotions were all over the place and the freezing cold from the concrete just went right through the blanket and my jumpsuit. I kept trying to get comfortable enough to sleep, adjusting the sandals and sanitary napkins. After awhile, I folded the blanket in half and wrapped it around the top half of my body. My legs were very cold with only the fabric of my jumpsuit between the concrete and my body, but I was a little more comfortable and I eventually was able to fall asleep for about an hour.

At 5:30 am a guard opened the door and started yelling for us to get up and give him our blanket. He gave us a sack with a half-frozen Hostess Honey Bun, a carton of milk, and a carton of juice. We were all freezing cold. The thought of eating the bun made me nauseous and I took just a few nibbles and drank some milk. One woman yelled obscenities at the guards every time they opened the door. She let them know how unhappy we were about giving up our blankets. The cold air continued to blow out of the ceiling vent.

I think of the women who I got to know in jail and think about how difficult it is to be incarcerated over and over again. Some of the women we got to know will most likely spend several nights sleeping on the concrete floor in the temporary holding cell. How do they survive? I think about the men being held at Guantanamo, being tortured and held for almost five years without any hope of release. What I went through seemed so unbearable, but it was nothing nothing nothing compared to what the men at Guantanamo are going through at this very minute. That thought is unbearable to me after my experiences of being held overnight in jail. We MUST do more to change our system, to bring social justice to those who are suffering in prisons all over.

Arraignment

At about 8:30 am Kathy, Suzanne and I, along with one other woman who we spent the night with, were led to the courtroom for our arraignment. We had a chain around our waist attached to our handcuffs. It was surreal walking into the courtroom with "normal" people just doing their job, but we realized this is still part of the corrupt sys-

tem we were enmeshed in. I was so relieved that it brought tears to my eyes seeing Sally, the attorney who was there to stand beside us and support us – someone from the outside who cared about us. It made me realize how powerless and alone I was feeling.

At that time, I just wanted to get out of there and never come back. It seemed the best way to accomplish that was to plead guilty. If I pled not guilty I would have to return to Des Moines for a trial. The group had decided during the planning that we would not try to take this to trial because we have more work we need to do. Kathy and Suzanne were both going to plead guilty also. I told Sally that I was feeling uncomfortable pleading guilty. I didn't do anything wrong. I did what was right in crying out for peace. Bush is the war criminal who should be pleading guilty in a court of law.

I was the first of the three women to be called before the judge and Sally stood beside me. The judge asked for my plea. I looked at Sally and she asked the judge if I could plead no contest. For some reason, you cannot plead no contest in the state of Iowa and the judge said that I could not enter that plea. So I said the word "guilty". That is my big regret in this experience. I was not guilty of doing anything wrong. We must stand up against the Bush regime. I did what I needed to do. The judge fined me \$65 plus court costs.

Aftermath

We were brought back to our cell and we thought it would take a long time to get processed out, but it happened very quickly. It was very sad to walk out the door of the cell knowing that our comrades who we had gotten to

know were being left behind. It felt good to change into our own clothes and get our property back.

It felt wonderful to walk out the door and take a breath of fresh air. "Freedom!" I shouted, and then quickly thought that freedom is really an illusion, especially in our country today. We found some of our support people who hugged us. I was really anxious to get on the road because I had a long drive home by myself with very little sleep. I was just so overcome by so many emotions and I started crying. Frank said that he would drive me back to the Catholic Worker house so I could get my stuff and get on the road.

I was feeling very emotional and thinking about what I had just been through when Frank gave me a copy of their Catholic Worker newsletter. On the front was a quote by Howard Zinn saying, "Protest beyond the law is not a departure from Democracy, it is absolutely essential to it." That was all I needed to help me realize that I did what I needed to do, and that I will, I definitely will, do it again.

Please come to Des Moines at the end of December/beginning of January as Voices for Creative Nonviolence (www.vcnv.org) calls for another push in our struggle for peace just before the Iowa caucuses on January 3.

For more pictures, videos and news articles on the action, go to the Des Moines Catholic Worker website at:

www.desmoinescatholicworker.org

or

<http://www.desmoinescatholicworker.org/sodapop1.html>