

# Report on Hiroshima/Nagasaki Peace Events in Oak Ridge and Knoxville

**EVEN BEFORE THE DUST HAD SETTLED**, we began getting calls. From Baton Rouge, Shelley's parents called to find out if she was in jail. "There was a picture in the paper here, and an article." From Toledo, Ali reported to Betty and Larry, "I heard it on Michigan public radio." When Tom arrived for his trial on Tuesday he said, "It was in all the Detroit papers. First time it was in all of them."

They were talking about the celebration of peace that marked Hiroshima Day in Oak Ridge, Tennessee on Saturday, August 4; it was one of a half dozen events stretching over nearly two weeks and involving hundreds of people in the work for peace. This report will try to do the impossible: to tell you what happened, briefly.

People began arriving earlier in the week to build puppets and help prepare for the Saturday events; by Friday evening there were thirty or forty people at the nonviolence workshop/peacekeeper training/puppet rehearsal at Church of the Savior in Knoxville. When it was over, we were ready for Saturday.

**WE HAVE GROWN SPOILED** at our actions in Oak Ridge by our amazing puppetistas whose performances have become a centerpiece of our peace actions; once again, they did not disappoint. A crew assembled at the Riverside Nonviolent Community house in Knoxville for a weeklong puppet build. The result? A Japanese folk tale was spun into an allegory starring elaborately costumed mice—entertainment and message rolled into one.

After two and a half hours of music punctuated by some speakers—Ralph Hutchison on the morality of nuclear weapons; Motoko Huthwaite on the current

national nuke scene; Shelley Wascom on what's happening at the Y12 plant in Oak Ridge today—and a recognition of the peace walkers, runners and bikers who converged on Oak Ridge for the peace rally, we set out

on a hot march to the bomb plant. Police stopped traffic as we made our way along Oak Ridge's main drag in the blazing August sun, nearly two hundred intrepid peace marchers, led by Buddhist chanting and followed by a giant dove, cloth wings flapping high above our heads.

**ALONG THE WAY**, we spread sunflower seeds—international symbol of the movement to abolish nuclear weapons—the hope of peace; next year we may see Mother Nature herself offering her dreams of peace. When we arrived at the Y12 Nuclear Weapons Plant, we found the road barricaded. Demonstrators tied peace

cranes to the fence and scattered sunflower seeds, massed in the road and sang and chanted, stood at the barricades and witnessed to life in the face of death. And four protesters began to chain themselves together and, eventually to the fence where they were joined by a fifth.

After half an hour, police cleared the road—except for the five at the barricade. Mary Dennis Lentsch was the first to be arrested. She was hauled to the police van while the others were being cut out of their cables. Then it was Mary Ellen Gondeck, Beth Brockman, and Bill and Billie Hickey. One from Tennessee, three from Michigan, one from North Carolina.

**BY THE TIME IT WAS** all over, we were worn out and headed for the jails. Mary Ellen was released on her own recognizance; Beth and Mary Dennis were held because of prior offenses; Bill and Billie refused to sign papers and stayed in jail in solidarity with the other two. Charged with obstructing a highway, they were taken to Anderson County Jail to wait for their day in court.

**MEANWHILE**, as the news of Oak Ridge's events rolled off printing presses around the world (we got a report from Britain of articles in the paper there), Saturday rolled into Sunday in Tennessee. Bishop Tom Gumbleton arrived fresh from a trip to Haiti to join us for the

Sunday vigil and a larger-than-usual crowd gathered to hear him and to join in the vigil.



He offered words of encouragement and optimism as we celebrated the work of peace together. The vigil ended with our traditional singing of “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize—” we sing it whenever members of our community are in jail.

**MONDAY WAS** August 6, the date of Hiroshima’s bombing. We assembled quietly in the pre-dawn hours at the bomb plant. As workers arrived they passed by a circle of readers and listeners—the names of Hiroshima victims were being broadcast over the loudspeaker. They drove past barbed wire fences dancing with peace cranes. First hand accounts of the destruction of Hiroshima were read. The bell tolled after each name and each reading, and another crane was tied on the fence. The Names and Remembrance ceremony keeps the spirit and message of *hibakusha* before us: Never Again.

**ON TUESDAY WE** went to court. Our criminal friends came before Judge Murch in General Sessions court in Oak Ridge. Judge Murch accepted pleas of “best interest,” from Mary Ellen, Bill, Billie and Beth. He fined them each \$25 and court costs (total \$232); he sentenced Beth to five days in jail; she’d already served three. The others got no jail time, though Bill and Billie had been in jail since Saturday. Mary Dennis asked for a bench trial in order to make a statement to the court. After her brief trial, she was sentenced to twenty days in jail; her statement was entered into the record.

It was Mary Dennis—“The nun? They put her in jail?”—that seemed to particularly capture the media’s attention. She has accumulated a bit of a

following with her multiple arrests, and the idea that our justice system finds itself required to incarcerate her in the name of...of what? public safety? rehabilitation? justice? punishment?...has captivated some in the media. This is how nonviolence works. So the Associated Press in Tennessee put the story on the national desk—thanks to arrestees from Michigan and North Carolina!—and from there it went out on the international wire.

Local coverage was unusually good as well—TV covered three events, there were four articles in the paper covering activities and trials, there were radio interviews with several stations.

We ended Tuesday evening with a Festival of Hope for the Wednesday jury trial; good food, music and quiet, serious talk on the front porch at Riverside.

**WEDNESDAY WE TRAVELED** back in time—three of last year’s August civil resisters had their day in court—a jury trial in Clinton, Tennessee. Pam Beziat, Erik Johnson and Tom Lumpkin all testified to their opposition to nuclear weapons before a jury which eventually found them guilty of blocking a road that the government had already barricaded. They were fined \$50 and will have a sentencing hearing on October 5. The wheels of the court system grind slowly, but they do grind—people, lives, hopes—all this and more is crushed under the relentlessly punitive system we call “justice.”

**THURSDAY WAS OUR FINALE**—peace lanterns to mark Nagasaki. In the waning daylight we gathered on the bank of the Tennessee River in Knoxville—four year olds, eighty year olds and just about everything in between. We held in our hands a piece of melted, twisted glass from Nagasaki. We watched an amazing shadow puppet presentation that told us the story of Oban, the Japanese lantern festival that has been adopted and adapted to mark Hiroshima and Nagasaki’s destruction. The shadow puppets delighted everyone (especially Utsumi Shonin

who was seen later with a flashlight in his mouth, sitting behind the screen manipulating the puppets.)

As darkness fell, we began to slip the lanterns into the water, encouraging them with a bamboo pole, watching as they slowly drifted to the middle of the river and began to move downstream, a choreographed troupe of dancers on the water, light and hope and prayers for peace illuminating the night and the world, and for a moment, in the stillness of the evening, watching them pass, we knew peace.



This report prepared by the Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance, sponsor of the August events in Oak Ridge and Knoxville, TN

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P O Box 5743  
Oak Ridge, TN 37831

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for more information, contact us at  
865 483 8202  
orep@earthlink.net

