

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

Interview with
Jerome Zawada

August 9, 2006
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Suzanne Becker

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

Suzanne Becker: *Go ahead.*

Jerry Zawada: My name is Jerry Zawada. I'm sixty-nine years old now. I was born April 28, 1937 and on that day another person was born, that exact day. His name happens to be Saddam Hussein. We were born the same day. Anyway, I was born in East Chicago, Indiana—that's not far from Gary, Indiana—and it's a neighborhood that was basically a Polish ghetto of sorts. At that time, many of the people there spoke only Polish. I didn't learn Polish very well. But I lived in that neighborhood. My father was from Poland. All my grandparents were from Poland.

Where? What part of Poland?

They were from the southeast corner, near Slovakia and near the Ukraine; it's about forty miles from both places, so it was in the southeast corner in the Carpathian Mountains. Anyway, that was my dad's side, and my mom's side is from a little different part of Poland, too.

My family background is such that we were a very close family. We've done everything quite a bit together, with cousins and the extended family as well.

Do you have siblings?

I have siblings. There are seven of us. Five of my sisters and brothers, and I have two sisters that are adopted sisters who have become my sisters. They were my cousins originally, but their parents died and my parents took them in right away and they became, practically speaking, just like my other siblings. And they're all living now and I'm the oldest boy. My sister was older than myself, a year-and-a-half older, and then I was next.

I grew up in a very religious family, and from little on it seems like I had the desire to become a priest. I was taught at a parochial school by sisters, by nuns, and became attracted along the way to the person of St. Francis of Assisi who founded the Franciscan Order of which I later became.

So you went to parochial school as a child.

Parochial school. That's right.

And what was it about it that made you realize that you had this calling?

Well, I became very attracted to the person of Jesus, as the person of Jesus. It was not necessarily all the—I'm not saying that I had a real good Biblical knowledge of Him but the thing that struck me from early on was His compassion and the values that He stood for. That stayed with me all my life up until this point. And so I just felt a certain closeness to Him that way. So that was the background for it.

That's interesting. So you have a religious background, and you mentioned that at some point you started to learn about St. Francis of Assisi. At what point was that?

I read the *Lives of the Saints*, when I was in grade school. I guess I was sort of like a little bit of what seemed like a religious nut but at the same time I just found these things attractive. And I was given a lot of encouragement for that by the sisters and all that, and my family. My family was very pleased with that type of thing, and probably from the beginning it was kind of like wanting to please them.

What did your folks do?

My dad was a butcher, and we had a grocery store, and my mom helped him out there, and early on we, the older of us—I was one of the oldest—took care of the younger children. And my mom and dad had a set of twins when I was twelve years old and I took care of them pretty much

of the time. My mom worked and my dad both in the grocery store, and then my parents got a tavern where they were selling liquor, and for a while we had both the grocery store and the tavern.

That sounds busy.

[00:05:00] It was busy. They were very hardworking people, but we did manage to go on vacations together as a family and they brought some fun things together, too.

And so from school, where did you go? So I imagine you were in Indiana up through high school.

I went for just a half-year, one semester, to the local high school, another Catholic school in Hammond, Indiana. My parents moved to Hammond, the next town over, in the meantime, and that's where I went for one semester. Then I transferred to—at that time they called it minor seminary, which was a high school boarding school, it was minor seminary and it was kind of just a boarding school, in Wisconsin, and that's basically where I joined that community eventually. As of this year, next week, on the fourteenth of August, it'll be fifty-one years since I joined that community. It was after high school in 1955 that I joined them. And next week also is fifty years since I made my first vows, so they're celebrating that a little bit.

Congratulations.

Thank you. Well anyway, so I went to the seminary in Wisconsin, and most of my education after that was in Wisconsin.

Where? Which community?

Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, very fancy place.

I know it.

You do?

Sure. I lived in Milwaukee for—

Did you? I love Milwaukee. I've lived there, too.

Yeah, for high school and college in Madison.

You, too. How interesting. I love Milwaukee. In fact, I'll be going there next week, too, to Milwaukee.

Small world.

Yeah. Well, we had one year, our first-year novitiate was in Lake Geneva, a real swanky place for Franciscans. Anyway, so from there, our college was in Burlington, Wisconsin. Burlington, you might be a little bit familiar, that's south of Milwaukee. So I went to college there at Burlington, which no longer exists. It was like our in-house college, basically. And then I went to four years of major seminary after that, and this was in West Chicago, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, and that's where I was ordained a priest by a Franciscan missionary from China. I was ordained June 13, 1964. I was already in final vows and stuff.

And then my first assignment was to the Philippine Islands, and I was there for about six years in the Philippine Islands. And very interesting, very many adventures. It was a remote area, very poor area; we were cut off by the sea so we traveled by boat and things like that. And typhoons and just a lot of adventures.

Anyway, I came back. I was back in the United States by 1971 and then I lived with an intentional community. David Buer was connected with that community, the Gospel Family it was called. And we lived in Chicago in kind of a ghetto area, and lived among people who were poor and gangs and stuff like that.

In the Uptown area, correct?

We did at first in the Near North Side. This was before some of the community moved to Uptown. But I lived in the Near North Side, Armitage and so on, and got involved there. We had a storefront and were working. The storefront, which we called it sort of a store, was like playing [00:10:00] store. I tell people laughingly, I told David earlier, that it was a store where we had 150 employees and about ten customers, because everybody who came there became part of the community. We ate together, soup at lunchtime, and we had married couples and I did some babysitting again for my godchildren. And so it was down-to-earth kind of. And we did things among the poor people, our work. And that lasted for me, and then we moved to Uptown. Some of us moved later into Uptown.

But after a while, things came crashing down for me. I don't have any hesitation mentioning this because it's a part of my life, too, but I succumbed to very severe clinical depression. It was sort of like I came to a point where I could not—I felt like everything we were doing was Band-Aiding the problems. We had so many street people coming, people with severe mental problems and emotional problems and so on, continuously, and I felt the weight of that. I felt like I just couldn't stand it anymore and I gave up. And for a long time I was trying to get help, I was getting some help, professional help, but nothing seemed to work. And this lasted for a good six, seven years. I hated living, I hated God. I just struggled with all of this with all my mind. And I did take a leave of absence from the Franciscan Order and from the priesthood, for about a year-and-a-half.

Eventually I did come back and I joined the community again in Green Bay, Wisconsin. It was at our novitiate there. And from there, this was again in 1983 I went to San Antonio, Texas to study Spanish—I already had studied some Spanish—and to improve my skills in Spanish. I heard the story of a Salvadoran schoolteacher which utterly changed my life, that one

story. See, I'd never really gotten rid of this feeling of unease and I feared working with people who were in destitute need. But I heard her story, and she spoke of her torture by the military down in El Salvador. She was a schoolteacher who worked for the rights of the poor and the rights of teachers for their salaries.

Do you remember her name?

Yes. Her name is Marta Alicia Rivera. It's strange that you ask me that because there are very few names that I remember, but she made such an impact on my life, and I never saw her after that.

So you heard her sort of personally speak, right? She was there in person?

Her story about the torture. She spoke. She was there in person. There was a small group there at a place called the Mexican-American Cultural Center, MACC they call it, in San Antonio. And it dawned on me almost like a light, I could not not do something. I didn't have to take away anybody's pain. I just needed to walk with them and learn from them and maybe somehow, I describe it in my religious terms as seeing the face of Christ, and working along those lines just learning from them, accompanying them in their plight and then hopefully to work with others for some type of resolution and relief. But that was my indication that I needed to become political. That was the same time. That it was not enough to be working for the day-to-day trying to—that's important, that's vital, some people are called to that to take [00:15:00] care of the basic needs of livelihood, that has to be done. Then there also needs to be people who would work, who would go to the roots of these problems, why is this happening, who or what group or what entity is creating this suffering for these people, and address that. And I felt that that would—in some shape or form, I had to get to that point.

So that moment, that incident, inspired you to go to a different level?

Yes. And I did go, during my break. It was a summer school in 1983 that I was studying Spanish. From there, I went down to the Rio Grande Valley, down in southern Texas, right on the border.

And there was a place called Casa Oscar Romero, named after the archbishop of El Salvador.

Are you familiar with that name?

No.

He was Archbishop Oscar Romero, and he was the archbishop of San Salvador, and in 1980 while he was having Mass—he was a remarkable man, he spoke out for the rights of the poor and so on, and [was] threatened, of course—while he was having Mass, liturgy, in San Salvador—the people just loved him—he was shot down. He was killed while he was having Mass. Well, he became for me, too, another important figure, and many other people who were killed, who were victimized by these wars.

So, well, this name on the house was after him, named after him. It was a refuge place, and people coming across the border from Central America, because of the war. The Contra wars there and so on, and you probably know the whole scene. Central America was a vital place for a lot of these happenings, and I got involved with the Underground Railroad, transporting people to places of safety from the border area, avoiding the checkpoints. I had to go through secret routes and so on. And I just did that at that time because that was one time that I had a whole carload and I was invited to do that.

What was that like?

I felt things were important again, things were meaningful again. I was thrilled and happy to be part of it, and I felt like this was the beginning of a learning process for me. I had to hear their stories and learn what was happening there from them, from the refugees themselves, and they gave me a good opportunity, even while I was transporting them. And I grieved with the

possibility of them being picked up by the Immigration, shipped back to their countries, and also what they had to undergo even in coming here to our country. And I was dismayed at our government's role in creating this terrible, terrible ordeal for these people by supporting these military regimes and so on.

So it became a goal for me to get more fully engaged. I had to finish my studies. I went down to Mexico to continue with some study and some involvement down there. I spent about three months in Guaymas, Sonora and worked with Franciscans there. So then I came back and I worked in a parish there in the valley in a town called Mission. And on my days off, every Monday, I went to Casa Oscar Romero and became close friends with those who were running the place. They were laypeople, Jack Elder and Stacey Lynn Merkt and some others, and some sisters and others who were working in that regard. And we used code language sometimes because we knew that we were being watched and stuff. But then I continued transporting people, sometimes through the night. I had to get back to the parish, so I would leave the people off about a mile before the checkpoint, and then they had to scramble out of the car, through the dark, and get to a place of safety.

Interesting. And so you would drive them?

I would drive them up—see, the checkpoints were like seventy miles north of the border, and [00:20:00] that's when cars would be stopped and examined to see if they were transporting refugees. So I'd stop about a mile or so before, shut off the lights before the checkpoint so we wouldn't be seen, and refugees would leave the car then and go through the field around it. Now, it had been my hope that I could pick them up on the other side somehow, but I couldn't do it and get back to the parish on time before the next morning.

Right. And you did this overnight.

I did that through the night and get back maybe around one, two o'clock in the morning or so, or later, because it was a long distance. And their stories used to stay with me, and I sometimes I would come back to the parish in tears, just recalling what they had to go through.

Well anyway, after a while the diocese got wind of what I was doing and you know what they told me? They says that I had the unfor—the chancellor of the diocese, the Catholic diocese—are you familiar with the structure a little bit?

I'm not too familiar, no.

Well anyway, they told me, they says I had the unfortunate experience of being ordained a priest, because if I was a layperson, not a priest, they could've hired me to do that work; they were afraid that they would be implicated because I was kind of like officially part of their group and they didn't want me to continue doing that, because of the risk that it would take for them. And I begged them, I pleaded with them, I tried to bargain with them, and they gave me an ultimatum and I had to leave. I felt like I had to leave.

So that's when I went up to Chicago, back up to the Midwest, and got involved with Pledge of Resistance, that was a group during the eighties, and also the Sanctuary Coordinating Committee. So involved with people, finding places for these people going up north then, you know, from Central America and other places. And I got involved politically, and 1984 was when the bombing of the harbors in Nicaragua took place under CIA auspices. The [U.S.] Navy was involved there in the harbor right off of Nicaragua, putting people there in danger, so I protested in front of the Naval Recruiting Center in Chicago, downtown. And at random a paddy wagon came by and I was just passing them by at the time and I says, Well, this is something that I really feel a part of, so why not? I should be part of it. So I just went there and at random they picked five of us out and put us in the paddy wagon and I was one of the five. That was the

beginning of my criminal career. And I've been arrested I know well over a hundred times maybe, maybe two hundred times. I don't know how many times. I stopped counting a long time ago. So I was part of that, and I lived and worked for the Witness for Peace, another group in Chicago.

And then I got transferred by my community to Milwaukee, and was in a parish there for three years but was able, while working in this parish, to continue being involved with the refugees and with people who were poor, getting them places, housing and clothing and whatever their needs would be, I got that. I was able to continue with that.

And then there was a group then that organized themselves called the Missouri Peace Planting '88. Very interesting group. And this took a whole year in planning. And I was working in the parish yet. And what this meant was that we were focused on the—see, I kept asking myself, where is the root of this oppression? Where does it go to? What is at the heart of it? And for me, along with other people, it was the nuclear threat, the bomb; the bomb that is sometimes celebrated here in the desert with the testing and all that. And so from that awareness, I joined this group. There were maybe about a hundred of us that gathered together, but out of [00:25:00] the hundred, fifteen of us decided to go to various nuclear missile silos in Missouri, and so we called ourselves the Missouri Peace Planting '88.

Which ones did you go to, do you remember?

Oh, they had names, we gave them names, but there were 150 missile silos in Missouri itself at that time, with nuclear bombs, you know, placed in the ground, and they were scattered all in the region towards Kansas City. You could say, I don't know, you could say the north, northwest corner or the western part of the state, close to Kansas City.

And so I went there, two of us went there to one of the sites on August 15, OK, 1988, and that happened to be the anniversary of my vows. It just happened to be that day. And the feast day from the community that I belonged to. Well, I went there. It was 102 degrees. There were two of us at that silo and the other thirteen people were scattered at other missile silos. There were about ten missile silos. Some, just one person was there. And we were spread out. And it was a very interesting day but I won't go into that because it's a long story, but it was a very interesting day. The awareness became more acute for me than ever before, that this is where I belong, and this is meaningful, and together with all these other people that I felt a part of, this is my family now, who are involved with all this protest.

And so we were arrested, given "ban-and-bar letters," the military gives us ban-and-bar letters forbidding us to come back to any military placement there. It was run by the Air Force then. And they came down while we were there. I was having Mass there on the missile silo, on the lid. And we had many symbols. And I wanted to keep our place sacred and to be there as long as we could, and so I put on three kryptonite locks on the fence to keep intruders out, like the military. So I put these bicycle locks on the gates. When they came around, there was a helicopter hovering right above us, there were three armored vehicles—three armored vehicles for the two of us, OK? There were about twenty guys in full riot gear with M-16s pointed at us. But we indicated that we were not a threat to them. We had signs all over the gate, the fence, a huge fence area, and we put symbols right on the missile silo lid. I purposely pasted the pictures of my nieces and nephews and my family, my whole family, everybody, everybody that I knew, that was close to me. My indication was that this bomb below my feet here was meant to vaporize a schoolgirl in Russia—they were all pointed towards Russia and they still are—not the ones there because now all 150 missile silos in Missouri have been emptied, but the other

places—that that bomb was going to come back and vaporize my loved ones, too. I had to draw that connection.

So anyway, when they came and took charge of us, they gave us the ban-and-bar. It took the rest of the day for all of us, for all fifteen of us from different—to be processed and given ban-and-bars. Well, several of us went the next day to another missile silo and did the same thing, because we were released. And we did the same thing. We sang. We prayed. We joined hands. When the military did come to take possession of us, we even invited them to join us if they so felt, to pray. And it was very meaningful, the whole thing; we did a lot of good things, symbolic things. And again given ban-and-bar letters and dismissed by the end of the day. And then the third day, again a number of us went to another missile silo and did that. And then on the fourth day, each one of us had these three ban-and-bar letters and we knew [00:30:00] that we were waiting for it to be going to court, eventually. And we had an interview with media on the federal building steps in Kansas City, Missouri, and over television then we burned our ban-and-bar letters, an indication that we could not recognize the injunction.

And how was that received?

Well, some of us did it again almost a week later to another missile silo, and the judge then was pretty irate. And he told us, he says, If you're going to go to any more missile silos, we're going to keep you in jail right now, so you have to sign a paper that you're not going to go to any more. Well, we did that because we all had to go back and explain things to our families and communities and all that and we needed time to settle things before we would go to trial.

Well, we did sign the paper but then, in the meantime, I had found out—the newspapers had it all over the country that by the production, by the storage of the nuclear missiles, the

bombs that we were building—that we were killing our own people. Contamination. Waters. People were dying from cancer. Downwinders over here.

So the newspaper came out with that story.

They came out. It came out. And these were things that I didn't know about personally. But Hanford, Washington was the worst, the Columbia River polluted. Fernald, Ohio and I think Rocky Flats and here and Savannah River, South Carolina were the places indicated, that these places were contaminated. I said, Wow, what is this? We're killing our own people just in the manufacture and the storage of these bombs. So I said, I cannot celebrate the Feast Day of St. Francis without going to another missile silo. That was the only way I could recognize his Feast Day; he had a great love for all of creation, the environment.

So I wrote a letter of explanation to the judge and I says, Judge, I'm sorry that it might look like I'm reneging on my promise to you, but I didn't know this before, so I said, I'm not really reneging on it. I just changed my mind. And I had somebody deliver it at the same time that I went to this other missile silo on October 4, 1988, which was the feast day of St. Francis. So I went into another silo by myself, and that was my fifth time. And of course the judge was pretty irate when they brought me into court and he says, You're a priest and you lied to me. And I said, No, I didn't lie to you. I just changed my mind. And I really had reason to change it. Well, he kept me in jail then just to make sure that I wouldn't get—

How long was that for?

That was only for about a month, the rest of that month, and then we had our trial by the end of the month. I actually was released after that but eventually I was given a sentence of twenty-five months in a federal prison for trespassing. It was not a felony. It was misdemeanor charges. Twenty-four months plus I got one month added for contempt because I wouldn't say who drove

me to the missile silo, so they charged me with one month of contempt. And then a year probation, besides that. And I served quite a bit of that time. I was in county jails, then I was in Oxford, Wisconsin in a camp there for a while; but then I blew the whistle on some of the dehumanization that was going on there and I didn't cooperate with some things that they wanted me to. And so they put me in the hole, in solitary confinement, and altogether about ninety days, I guess, and they transferred me. They raised my security level to a higher-level prison and they shipped me around the country in something they called, laughingly, "diesel therapy," to help to correct my behavior, which didn't work too well.

That's something. For a misdemeanor.

Yes, but several misdemeanor charges. So I got kind of a sampling of different prisons in the country. People have encouraged me to have like a travelogue of prisons or something.

You should do a little guide.

[00:35:00] Guide. Travel guide. Well anyway, so I ended up, after going through a series of prisons along the way in Oklahoma and then ending up in Danbury, Connecticut. I was in Danbury, Connecticut, and there I got into a little bit of trouble again, too, not too bad but I was held about two weeks in the hole, and then transferred after two months to Sandstone, Minnesota.

So you've been all over.

Quite a bit. And then I was released when [Operation] Desert Storm was taking place. Desert Shield. Desert Shield was first, wasn't it? Before the invasion. And yeah, I was released then. And I was sick with that, with the thought of going to war, and innocent people are still in war.

So I was on probation then, for that year, and during that year I actually violated my probation and eight times I was arrested during that year.

How did you violate it?

I went to federal buildings and I protested the war, and I was not allowed to do that, but I had a very kind probation officer that I visited in Milwaukee. He was very gentle, and I told him to quit his job and join us in the peace movement. He was a very kind person. And on the paper there was a question: "Have you been arrested since our last visit?" which was the month before, and I just didn't write anything there. I just left it blank. I said, Well, if he really wants to know, then I'll tell him. I'll tell him the truth. But since they didn't press for that, I just left it blank. But of that war, I just really felt the insanity of that, too, back in 1991 and afterwards. And in fact I asked him for permission to come here [Las Vegas] for a retreat while I was on probation, and he gave me the OK. But then when I came here, I had to report to the probation officer here downtown in Las Vegas, and when I went there he asked me, Well, where are you staying?

I said, I'm staying together with Louie Vitale here.

[He said,] You can't stay with Louie Vitale! He's a bad influence on you!

And so I gave him the Catholic Worker address here in town, which is just as bad, but I stayed here with Louie.

And had you known Louie prior to that?

Yeah, I did, and I was very impressed by his—

How did you guys meet?

Well, we both belong to the Franciscan Order, and then during the 1980s, you know, when I first had this big change in my life, I knew he was the Provincial of the Franciscans for this community. He was over the West Coast. And his was the first and only province that declared sanctuary for the refugees coming from Central America. And I was very impressed by that and I

wanted to meet him, and I did, and he's my closest friend. We belong to separate provinces but he's my closest friend. Anyway, so that's how I met him.

[00:38:31] End Track 2, Disc 1.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 3, Disc 1.

Well, so—where was I now? OK, I was here. And four of my arrests during that probation time took place here at the test site. And during that time Louie and myself did some backcountry action, too, where we went through the night.

Right. Now, when did you first come to the test site?

Come here? My first time here was in 1987. That was actually before the Missouri Peace Planting. And I fell in love with the desert here, too. I came in spring and it was like a weekend that was called a Franciscan Weekend, that people were taking turns, different groups. The Jews had a weekend then, too.

And that was up at the test site?

Yes. Ed Asner was here and I got to know him a little bit, too, and just a delightful man.

Anyway, what happened was that I crossed the line, over, and at that time in 1987 yet they were—what happened was that I didn't want to come, I couldn't come back here for financial reasons. That would be too costly. I didn't have that much money to work with. So I thought that I wouldn't give them my name when they processed us. So they took us to Beatty then at that time for processing, and my companions were given a date for a trial or something, which eventually was dropped. They didn't have to come. But I didn't know that. None of us knew that at the time. And so I gave them a John Doe, I didn't give them—and they were pretty irate, whoever processed us, and after they blackened my fingers for the fingerprints, then I says, Could I have something to wipe my hands off? They just picked me up and threw me out

the door and they says, we're not going to even bother helping you out one bit because you're not cooperating. Well anyway, but they gave me a date and I said [to myself], Well, I can't come back here, so what I did was I called the judge the next day and made a deal, the judge here, or magistrate.

And do you remember who the judge was?

Oh, he's somebody that everybody knows. He was a pretty good guy and I can't remember back in 1987. [Judge William Sullivan]

OK, so it's the same—gosh, off the top of my head, I can't remember either but—

But he was very cooperative and he says he would take care of my case on the next day, on the Tuesday afterwards. And he agreed to it. And I gave him my name then, and I had a hearing and I was sentenced to five days, and I was taken up to Tonopah to the—it was kind of like a brig or something that they had there. And so I was there. And it was a wonderful time. It was a wonderful time. I really cherish that whole experience. I felt so close to the people there and I sensed the presence of God very keenly, very strongly, and I just found it very meaningful. I wrote a story about that afterwards.

You did. Where can we find that story?

I have it in the—by my niece's place I have a big file cabinet with all my stories in it from that time on.

So anyway, I did serve those five days and then I left. The others didn't have to serve any time but that didn't make any difference.

Now, you said when you first got out to the desert, you fell in love with it. What was it about it that really struck you?

Well, the cactuses were in bloom at that time, in the springtime. That was one section. But the vastness of it all. And the people, the people that I fell in love with that were part of this whole effort. That was a big primary. And the stories. The stories that emerged that I didn't know before. And I described—this was the first time the image of a place that I've been at was someplace between Heaven and Hell. That's how I regard it.

Can you describe that?

OK, the beauty, the intensity of, say, the presence of God in the actions of people, and the vastness of the terrain. And the sky and the mountains, the colors and everything just was so much in focus, it was just highlighted for me. So I regarded this as [00:05:00] Heaven. And the Shoshone, the Indians that I found, that I fell in love with, too. And yet the devastation that was occurring below the earth and even above the earth here. The bombs. The testing of the bombs. The desecration. And what it meant, say, in terms of Hiroshima and Nagasaki when it was used on human beings, and you know, the land that was destroyed for millenniums perhaps because of the contamination. So all that was Hell. That was the hell. And the fact that people have made judgments, that kind of evil decision, was bad. And I considered that to be a slap in the face to God, I called it.

The decision to use and to create?

To use and to create this type of threat to the world, people, and all of creation. So I got the sense then that was an opening for me again, and that stayed with me, too; but I wanted to continue also working afterwards about the happenings in Central America, I became very close to it. Maybe I should move on a little bit into the nineties, then?

Sure. I mean it's an interesting story. Well, you'd mentioned just a little while ago that you'd been involved in some of the backcountry actions that had gone on. If you could talk about those, that would be great.

Well, that one night with Louie and a bunch of others, and it was dark. We couldn't put on any lights or flashlights or something because we didn't want to be picked up right away. There's some funny part to that story. And there were about thirteen, fifteen of us maybe altogether and we were going through the dark and kind of stumbling and stuff.

And you'd been staying at Peace Camp?

We were at the Peace Camp before, but I don't know if we were that night, though, but we did go out late. And I'd been at the Peace Camp before, staying there three days or so.

Anyway, a bunch of us went out there and we—it had to be 1992, I think, or '91—'91 because it was when I was on probation. So we went through the night. And Louie wanted me to have the liturgy. We were going to have a liturgy, a Mass, right in the last gully before going into Mercury. We were going to go into the town and leaflet the town and do some, just be—until they would arrest us. Well, what happened was we made it to the last gully, and then all of a sudden we were surrounded by M-16s and stuff. And I had this box there with the Mass stuff that I was going to have. Louie is so impetuous, he'll just say, OK, hurry up, get the Mass going. I said, Louie, they're standing around with these guns pointed at us. I don't think we'll have time for that. And the guy yells at me, Put that box down! You know, don't—because he was afraid that maybe it was some explosives or something. How would he know that?

So they arrested us and they put us in the pen along with the other people. There were other people being arrested that day, just before the trespassing part, by the cattle guard at that

time. So we were not treated any differently. We were put there and we were not charged with anything further, even though we had done this backcountry action and stuff and had gone—that we were not discriminated against. And of course there's been a good rapport between the people arrested here and the NDE [Nevada Desert Experience] people and all the people, Wackenhut and the Sheriff's office and stuff. So we were not—that was the end of that.

I've heard a story about when Louie was involved with going to the building in Mercury that actually used to be the church?

Yeah, that's right, and I wasn't here for that.

You weren't there for that. OK.

No. I wasn't here. I was going to be like a historian and do some other follow-ups on that, too, but I never got a chance to. But we did go up because at that time there were the planes [00:10:00] that were being housed for the Iraqi invasion, being done here at Nellis [Air Force Base], and close to Tonopah was the storage place, and we went there. We were going to plant again some—I don't know what we were going to plant. Flowers? But we brought some spray paint and we were going to redecorate the planes or something in the place where they were at, so we had that in mind. Well, we just got to the entrance there, and I don't know if they somehow got alerted or something, but they stopped us, right after we crossed into the area there not too far from Tonopah, and so we were taken into custody then and charged. That was one of our arrests during that time also, because I was arrested four times here during that period. That was a month that I spent down, for a retreat. Everybody makes a different kind of retreat.

So I went back and eventually my probation officer somehow got a sense that maybe I was not as innocent as I looked. But I confessed, I told him that I did get arrested. And he says,

Well, how many times? And I think he blanched when I told him eight times. So, well, OK, that was then. That was then.

So I had to go back to five more months; I was in Chicago at MCC, Metropolitan Correctional Center in Chicago, the triangular building, and I call it the penthouse apartment. It was on the twenty-fifth floor, right at the top almost. But I was there for five months, never left that building, never left that place. And that was for violating my probation.

And then I got out and I had some other happenings then. I went to Central America. I spent a month up in Guatemala. Oh, before that happened, I got the OK eventually to spend at a Catholic Worker house in Chicago, Su Casa Catholic Worker. And it was a place which housed people, the majority of them had survived torture, people seeking political asylum. And I referred to it as a place where the walls reeked with pain, where people screamed through the night sometimes reliving their torture.

One of the people who lived there was Sister Dianna Ortiz, who was a nun, an American, who worked in Guatemala, and was taken in 1989 by the military people, four guys. She was raped repeatedly, a nun, young, young nun, rather pretty, and she was burned with cigarettes 111 times on her body, and then she was put into a pit with dead and dying people; they put a knife in her hand and forced her hand to stab another woman. She was screaming and screaming. She became pregnant and had an abortion. Oh, and they transported her to another location and during a traffic jam she was able to get out of the car. Her story, she's written her autobiography—we became really close friends, and till this day she works for torture survivors in Washington, D.C. A remarkable woman. We kept our friendship going.

Well anyway, she encouraged me and another Catholic Worker person to accompany a young man who wanted to go back to Guatemala. He was an indigenous person, never felt at

home in Chicago or that, but he was tortured terribly—they left him in a coma—by the military.

[00:15:00] They cut his throat also.

And this was for what reason?

For the reason that he was basically a conscientious objector. He wouldn't go into the military. And so they left him. They threw him on the side of the road, thinking that he was dead. The firemen picked him up, passing by. They took him to a hospital that was about 90 kilometers from where they lived, in Solóla in Guatemala, and kind of waited till he came out of his coma and then he was able to indicate—he couldn't speak because they had cut his throat, for a while. But it's incredible that this guy was able to recover his voice. He was brought to the United States. Amnesty International, America's Watch, got to know his story. His family would be searching for him, his parents, from village to village, looking. They didn't know. They thought he was dead, but they did find out when they brought him back and they sent him to the United States for therapy, to Chicago. Chicago, till this day they have a wonderful place called Marjorie Kovler Center for Survivors of Torture, from all different countries; and that was kind of my role there was transporting people for therapy. I became very close to Julio Chalcu Ben and his dad who was there, and then I went back with them to Guatemala and stayed with them, with the family up in the mountains, two of us did, and we stayed to offer whatever protection we had. His story was aired on *Dateline NBC*. And he knew the perpetrators. One of them was his uncle, in the military. And so he mentioned that in his faltering Spanish, because that was his second language like it is mine. So we were afraid for his safety. But he was regarded as a hero when we got back there, and he's safe till this day. He's a delightful man. He's a delightful man. He's a good artist, and he's a farmer, very simple farmer.

What a story!

Yeah, very special, and that whole month was really—slept on the ground and just took—it was very basic, very basic.

Well, it sounds like your whole life has been just devoted to helping or at least to being with others.

Just the being with them, that's all, but learning from them. And then I got very close during those years to one of the people that was with me at the Missouri Peace Planting and she's become very significant for me. Kathy Kelly. I don't know if you've heard her name. She's from Chicago but she's been nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize. Now, I just found out this afternoon that she's on her way to Lebanon. She's always been at hot spots in the world, and she's been in Iraq maybe close to thirty times, maybe over thirty, and she's helped formulate this group called Voices in the Wilderness. And I was part of that, too, and I did get a chance to go with her and with others to Palestine during the times when that was under curfew, the different parts, like Jenin [A large section bombed by Apache helicopters from the U.S.]. I had some incredible experiences there. I was being shot at in Jenin but I didn't stay there. Just wanted to scare me off, not only me but others, too, or they were not good shots. I was running. Hard to know. [This was in 2002.]

Ten years before I also was with a group in 1992. We went to Israel, Palestine, for a Walk for a Peaceful Future in the Middle East, and we were walking from Haifa down to Jerusalem, and it was an international group. There were a few hundred of us from different countries and it was wonderful. And so we were walking and had the OK at that time to go into the West Bank [00:20:00] but then they retracted that permission. Some of us went anyway. We crossed over a little bit. They sent the cavalry and arrested some of us and we were in jail there for two days or so, two or three days, in Israel. I was in Afula. Are you familiar with—? You

are? I was there for a couple of days. And we were released then, told to leave the country, but we stayed around for a while, some of us did.

And so I—different thoughts, I guess. I think your stories are pretty amazing and the work that you have done is pretty incredible and—

I had the luxury of the time and stuff. I didn't always get permission from my community, and when they would ask why I would do these things without asking, I would explain that it was easier for me to get their forgiveness than to get their permission.

Very true. That's a good way to approach it.

I had to do that because otherwise I would never get these OKs. And people would help, there were people who wanted somebody to do that in their stead. They didn't have the time that I had to do it. And then Kathy Kelly was always an inspiration for me, and sometimes I would drive her places and then we'd both end up getting into trouble. I refer to her as "Driving Miss Daisy."

You are the instigator sometimes.

But she was great. And other people, so many other people. There's just a broad spectrum of people who hunger for these changes and who want to press for them.

I think it's interesting, just going back to something that you said earlier on in our discussion, is that as you became more aware, trying to search for what is the root of these problems, and you became aware of the nuclear root. I was wondering if, though you were quite young when this happened, if you had a recollection of the incident at Hiroshima?

The end of Hiroshima?

Yeah, at the end of the war.

At that time, the kind of take I would have had would've been what people were fed at that time.

The end of the war—

Right, well, you were just a little kid at the time.

I was seven years old, and I think at that time I would be—I had mixed feelings. I could remember having mixed feelings about that, and I don't know why, but I didn't have any knowledge about what the nuclear bomb would be doing to the people. I felt like it was the end of the war, and of course we were victorious, you know, that kind of a thing. There was a euphoria at that time. But I was pretty young and I wouldn't have had a clear idea of what was happening. And hardly anybody did then. We didn't know. I mean somebody maybe would think about it, how many innocent people were killed.

Right. Do you think we still, we collectively, being I guess the Western world, have the same type of understanding of those events or—?

Some do. A lot of people, because I've gone—

Do you think that's shifted at all?

Some. It depends where and who you're talking to. I would have to say, one of the benefits of prison life, because I've spent altogether over four years in prison, including this recent time, one of the benefits that seem to accrue in prisons for a lot of people—now this does not exonerate the fact that we've been incarcerating so many people, nonviolent people, and I'm very strongly opposed to that—but one of the benefits that seems to be there is people start reflecting, and that doesn't happen in our society too often. People are so geared towards motion, continuous motion, almost to the point to be distracted. I mean there are very bright things that happen, you know, many engagements, many entertainments, but there's a lot of [00:25:00] people in the world that are left out of it, because of our enjoyment, and I don't think that's right. I don't think that's right. People are—maybe not personally not always aware of it and they might be personally not guilty—but I think it's a societal evil, it's a societal problem. I've come to a very

firm conviction from being at these other places in the world that we are one family and we have to take care of each other and we have to take care of our mother, the Earth, and all that we see here, and we're not doing that.

And I think one of the interesting things, having come to be familiar with the Nevada Desert Experience and what they've done throughout the years is that they've been going for almost thirty years at this point and there is a continued presence and just again this past weekend out there. What do you—I just lost my question but what is the significance of that? I mean even at this point sometimes people will say, “Well, you know, we have the Test Ban Treaty,” nothing's happening, but there's been an ongoing presence. What do you think that means?

Well, I think we have to be faithful to it because there's always looming on the horizon, there's always that threat. The threat is there. It hasn't changed. Things like subcritical testing is just another guise for threatening the future. And I think about, and what they have in mind, some of the stuff that they have, well, including—the bunker busters maybe might be shelved right now, but then there are these other things, Divine Strake and all that, which point in the direction of further escalation and the resumption of nuclear testing. And it's what we've been engaged in in terms of warfare and weapons of mass destruction that we still have. And how do we gain credibility? How can we tell Iran or North Korea or any other country to stop it when we still have all this in our stockpiles and are taking care of them, like nursing them like we are still being the midwives for these bombs?

So what's the next step for the peace movement in general?

In terms of that, I think for now, for me personally, I feel like we have to stop these wars. The ongoing—it's just incredible now, with the Iraq War, the Afghanistan—and for me, there's this momentum being built now called the Declaration of Peace, is one of the efforts. It's national,

and it's taking root, and the people here with the community here at the Nevada Desert Experience and other people have been the ones to initiate this nationally. And I'm excited about it, and I want to do everything I can. I've been to Iraq, I've been before during the bombing, I feel like I've gotten to know the people there and love them. And whenever we see children dying in the hospital I can't just go by and not do anything about that. So I feel like this is an immediate thing to take care of, and it's all connected. But the long-range thing for me is still the nuclear threat. So whatever aspect I can be part of in saying no to it and addressing it—and I feel like, because I belong to the Franciscan Order and the Franciscan roots were very much here, and I love the desert; and I know I can foresee myself even living here to Las Vegas, so I'm considering that, together with Louie and other people. I find that this is a sacred place, even if it is a place between Heaven and Hell, and I feel like these are the kind of places I need to be at. But I will go wherever there is a call, where there is a way [00:30:00] to address the insanity of warfare. I'll be going to Washington. I think they're going back and forth there, too, to New York City to the United Nations and so forth. So these are areas whenever the occasion is there and I'm invited and if I have to hitchhike.

Hopefully not in this heat. Well, we have just about five minutes left on this disc and we can—
That's enough, that's plenty.

I didn't know how you were doing.

I'm OK. But I didn't want to—I just got out of jail, I guess it's been six months.

You were with Father Louie?

I've been in the last—since 9/11 [2001] I've spent about nineteen months in prison, in federal prisons, three times for the School of the Americas, six month segments, minimum months. In

Wisconsin there's this place called—ELF it was called, extremely low frequency, sending signals to all the nuclear subs.

Really.

Yeah, they were all there. This was like a very, almost hidden type of thing up in the wooded area of northern Wisconsin near a reservation. And it sent signals to all these bombs and there was havoc being done to the flora and fauna with these signals. Well we were protesting for a number of years there, and a couple times, I was arrested together with Kathy Kelly, "Driving Miss Daisy;" anyway she gave a wonderful—she's a wonderful speaker, just excellent—and so she gave her talk and then we both crossed our little line. I was just sentenced to one month so that was tagged on to my sentence. And ironically the whole place, the ELF was shut down the day before my sentence began. This is OK that it was shut down

Served a purpose. Well we're down to three minutes, do you have any thoughts that you'd like to wrap up with?

Well I just feel this is something we have to do together. People say they can't possibly do the things that I've been doing; they don't have the luxury for it they don't have time they have family commitments. When I had my parents around and I took care of them too, or the refugees or something, it was different. But I see that we can all do something, we all have that capacity and if we hunger for these changes and stuff we can all be part of it in some shape or form, like you telling these stories, you recording these stories, that's a very major part of it. I can't do that I could never do that I don't have the patience for it. But on the other hand I have something that—and I think we can all do something

So we all have a part in this somehow.

Yes. And I think we have to look to that and get excited about it, and know that whatever part even if it seems minimal or small it's important and it's enabling others, sometimes myself sometimes somebody else, to do the other part of it too and that's what I would like to encourage people to do.

Well thank you.

You're welcome

Thank you for sharing with us and taking the time.

Thank you for listening.

[End of interview]