

North Country Peace Builder

Minnesota Fellowship of Reconciliation

Volume 59, No. 3
November 2008

MN FOR HELPS LAUNCH MN PEACE TEAM by Don Christensen

With support and encouragement from the Minnesota Alliance of Peacemakers and excellent training by members of the Michigan Peace Team, the Minnesota Peace Team was deployed to the streets of St. Paul during the five days of the Republican National Convention. Throughout the summer a group composed of representatives from Vets for Peace, Friends for a Nonviolent World, Pax Christi – St. Joan of Arc Parish, Walker Community Church, the Nonviolent Peace Force and the Minnesota FOR toiled to put it all together. Theory and practice of active nonviolence was debated and discussed; uniforms were designed and made; money was raised and trainings were planned and conducted. By September 1, when the Republican and the anti-war protesters hit town, nearly 100 MN Peace Team volunteers had completed 10 hours of training and were ready or not!

Although the outcomes of this 'experiment in active nonviolence' are still being processed and debated, and mistakes and learnings will be analyzed far into the future, participating groups and individuals generally feel that something new and promising has been born in our community. In the aftermath of the RNC a new coordinating team is now being formed and new priorities and projects are being considered. We believe that the Minnesota Peace Team is an old idea whose time has finally come.

This issue of the North Country Peace Builder highlights reports and reflections by several team members on their experiences during the RNC. If you are interested in learning more or possibly becoming directly involved in the Minnesota Peace Team, here is a brief description of who we are and how to contact us:

The Minnesota Peace Team is a non-partisan group that responds to community requests to be present in potentially volatile situations.

Our singular focus is to assist in preventing people from hurting one another and to protect the civil rights of everyone involved.

The team does not interfere with civil disobedience and does not try to enforce laws.

All team members are trained in active nonviolence, to be used with an attitude of openness and respect toward anyone involved in potentially violent encounters.

To learn more or to contact Minnesota Peace Team, go to mnpeaceteams@gmail.com or www.fnvw.org



Members of the Coordinating Team of the Minnesota Peace Team. Left to right: Melvin Giles, Steve Cobian, Ann Lewis, Don Christensen, Katie Wojtan (2008 MN FOR Peacemaker of the Year), and Matt Hunter.

Peace Team Experience

by Lydia Caros

During the Republican National Convention in St Paul, a large peace demonstration was planned in order to protest the war in Iraq and Bush's presidency in general. A small group of nonviolent activists formed a Peace Team. Being on the Peace Team was a new experience for me. I have been committed to nonviolence for 40 years now, and have participated in multiple nonviolent protests and acts of civil disobedience over the years. Being a Peace Team member, however, was a different experience. It was not an activity of speaking out or acting against government policies. It was, in fact, a day of setting aside my political views and maintaining a focus on how to protect people of all views.

The job of a Peace Team is to try to ensure that no one gets hurt. That means that we are committed to supporting all who are involved in the protest in their right to speak their mind, do their job, protest policy- without harm. As Peace Team members we will intervene and protect anyone who is getting hurt or at risk of imminent harm, no matter whether they are protestors, counter protestors or police. This may involve trying to engage in a conversation that may defuse a heated conversation. It may also include standing between the victim and the one doing harm. Often it is just a peaceful presence that may influence the reactions of people. When we went out on the street in our neon yellow vests and yellow baseball caps with "MN Peace Team" inscribed on them, I had more than a few doubts about whether we would be able to do any good.

Our first taste of any "action" was when an early wave of protestors came through the corridor- the anarchists. They were a group of about 600 people, and although they were extremely loud and theatrical, they caused no harm as they passed by. A few individuals, however, were very angry and came close to the counter protestors, swearing repeatedly; others were screaming insults. With all the noise and confusion, it appeared to be a risky situation for escalating into violence. There were a few very tense minutes. Each time there was an incident, it seemed that our presence helped remind at least one side of the conflict to keep from "losing it". As the main group of protestors came through (about 10,000 people), the counter protestors lined up by the curb holding their "Victory in Iraq" and "Win the War" signs. I decided to stand in the line with them.

The main group of protestors was peaceful and speaking their case against government policies. Many, however, were angry and made a point to let the counter protestors know it- as though they were responsible for the war policies.

Standing in that line was an amazing experience for me. I was in a line with people whose politics I disagreed with completely. I was and am against what this convention represented as much as any of the protestors. I hated every sign they had, and I disagreed with everything they said to the protestors. And yet, I felt clear and committed to protecting everyone from harm.

I stood between two Republican men who seemed to be getting the most ire from the protestors. I explained to them what my role was. They didn't ask me about my politics at all. I had no sign, just MN Peace Team on my vest and hat. As the protestors passed by, they yelled and screamed and put signs up to the Republican faces. When the Republican on my right side started taunting the protestors, I sometimes changed the subject and talked about the weather, or remarked about how everyone felt so strongly about their views. I gently chided him once or twice for particularly hurtful comments. We stood for over an hour watching the 10,000 people come through and several hundred people swearing, yelling, insulting and challenging the line as they walked by. By the end of the march, there had been no fights, no violence. With the amount of emotion and venting going on, that seemed just short of a miracle. The man I had been standing next to throughout the march turned to me at the end and asked, "Were you assigned to me?"

Being a member of the Team has given me a renewed appreciation and respect for the power of presence.

My Week on the Streets

by Steve Clemons

The following paragraphs are excerpts from a much, much longer report the author wrote about his day by day experiences. The full version is posted on the MN FOR website www.mnfor.org. These paragraphs, help provide alternatives to the mainstream so-called news.

“You’re hot, you’re cute, take off your riot suit” was the best chant I heard as demonstrators sitting in the street confronted the “ninja-turtle”-clad riot police who had surrounded the group. I myself got caught up in calling the heavily armored-up police in the black padded costumes that included gas masks, long wooden batons, helmets and clear visors that name from the TV show of the early 90’s. They were everywhere.

Having a retired Chief-of-Police for a brother-in-law, I know first-hand the friendship and value of many of the “men and women in blue”. Virtually all the cops I talked to who were not “turtled-up” in the riot gear were



friendly to me as I greeted them in the streets wearing my lime-green vest with MN Peace Team emblazoned on the front and back. (We also wore bright yellow hats so we could find each other in crowds.) However, when the turtle costumes were donned, many of the cops took on a different demeanor. And when the face shields were lowered, any semblance of their common humanity with us seemed to fade away. Verbal communication with most ceased entirely. Force and intimidation became the tactic de-jour rather than friendly “community policing”.

Our job as newly trained (and very inexperienced) Mn Peace Team members was to remind those we encountered – police, protesters, counter-protesters, and bystanders – of the humanity and inherent worth

of each other. It was our goal to attempt to de-escalate situations where others were likely to be physically hurt.

When you put on the Mn Peace Team vest, you are taking on a role as a non-partisan. In that role, we were going to try to protect demonstrator, counter-demonstrator, police, and bystander alike. Normally, training for this type of role should take days –if not weeks- with lots of role-playing and learning to make quick decisions as a team. The idea is to build trust because one’s own safety might depend on them – especially in the chaos and confusion engendered by mass marches with people angry with those in authority.

Only 3 months before the start of the Convention, Peter Dougherty, a Catholic Priest and member of the Michigan Peace Team, came to the bi-monthly meeting of the Minnesota Alliance of Peacemakers – a collective of more than 70 Twin Cities area peace and justice organizations. He described how the Michigan Peace Team over the past 17 years has tried to serve as a non-partisan presence in public situations where conflict might ensue – be it at a Klan rally, a state execution, mass marches or demonstrations where counter-demonstrators were likely to be present, or to protect human and civil rights workers. With his leadership we formed and

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The Fellowship of Reconciliation envisions a world of justice, peace, and freedom. It is a revolutionary vision of a beloved community where differences are respected, conflicts addressed nonviolently, oppressive structures dismantled, and where people live in harmony with the earth, nurtured by diverse spiritual traditions that foster compassion, solidarity, and reconciliation.

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trained our own team to respond to the needs when the Republican National Convention came to town on Labor Day.

(Editor's note: At this point Steve's report has day by day description of the actions and events. This report concludes with some of his observations.)

The **militarizing** of the police was quite evident. These were no longer "Public Safety Officers" or even "Law Enforcement Personnel". Will we ever be able to return to "**community policing**"? Will those who experienced the "ninja Turtle" effect ever go to the cops when they feel they need help? This experience gave me new insights into how many in the black community often experience the police – as a threat rather than an asset.

This is a small taste of what it might feel like to be on the "receiving" end of **empire**. I kept coming back to visions of Roman cohorts and phalanxes when the cops moved in unison as units. I asked myself the question: What did Jesus think when he saw the Roman soldiers in his country? Maybe this was as close as Americans

will get to remembering viscerally that we are at war.



The most disturbing aspect was when the cops "armored-up" there was no visible badge, no city ID, no personal accountability. In debriefing on the second night, Team members told of witnesses at Mickey's Diner telling them they had captured pictures of what appeared to be a Minneapolis cop repeatedly tasing and kicking in the head a guy already down on the street. To the witnesses, it was a clear case of brutality but other cops hustled off the cop before he could be identified.

The concept of Free Speech was lost to intimidation. The Free Speech area touted by the St. Paul Mayor as a symbol of openness to protestors was a joke – it was located within the highly militarized zone and anyone who feared they might be

tear gassed studiously avoided the area. A friend of mine had reserved a 45-minute spot at 12:30 PM Wednesday noon. He gave his talk to an audience of 1!

It appeared that the media and "street medics" were lumped with "the enemy" ("anarchists") – fit to be gassed, pepper-sprayed, and arrested unless they were "embedded" with the police.

No one on the Team saw anyone throwing feces or urine at the cops – despite the reports from the "mainstream media" and the Sheriff that it was one of the reasons for the actions of the police.

Why are delegates kept in a bubble from what is happening on the outside? With the mainstream media's failure to cover most of what happened on the streets (except for reports of "anarchists breaking windows and throwing urine and feces"), the delegates were kept in the dark about the large presence of people opposed to the war and their party's policies.

What we experienced was the **demonization of dissent** - if you can label some as "**anarchists**", you can dismiss them. Many self-identified anarchists are committed to principled nonviolence. There is a small group of predominately younger people who do seem to have little regard for the rights of others and seem to me to be

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For Better or Worse

by Don Irish

Four years ago I lifted my spirit by listing more than 40 ways in which I observed that behaviors had changed for the better – personally, locally, nationally – in our society and in other parts of the world. As an ‘update’ I present 20 more *recent gains* for humanity and all living things:

- The use of less invasive surgery techniques
- A growing sensitivity to the “feelings” in our treatment of and relationships with domestic and wild animals
- A greater openness to speaking about formerly “taboo” topics such as suicide, alcoholism, therapy, rape, addictions, one’s age, our physical bodies, cancer, Alzheimers and abortion
- A growing challenge by members of Congress and citizens to U.S. violations of international law and treaties, civil rights, provisions of the Constitution, torture, censorship and imperialism
- Increase in support and use of mass transit, biking and alternatives to automobiles
- More interest, training and practice of active nonviolence in pressing for social change
- More Nobel Peace prizes being awarded to social activists and women
- Due principally to refugees and wars, diversity is increasing in many Western countries.
- The governments of Australia and Canada have made formal apologies to their indigenous peoples for years of mistreatment.
- Virginia and other Southern states and communities have made formal apologies for practices and conditions of slavery.
- More interest and involvement in U.S. elections
- Gay-lesbian issues and same-sex marriage are being recognized in the U.S. on the basis of equal rights.
- Instant Runoff Voting is gaining recognition as a more democratic and economical way to secure ‘majority support’ in contests with multiple candidates.
- Growing sentiment in the U.S. against capital punishment for minors, persons with disabilities, and cases of likely racial/ethnic/political discrimination due to use of DNA and other new tests
- Pressures increasing on the U.S. to “rejoin the world” with regard to abiding by treaties, removal of military bases, and reversal of “imperial policies”
- Developments in Latin America to create their own continental media, trade agreements, and opposition to U.S. dominance
- The International Criminal Court (ICC), Truth Commissions, and domestic tribunals are bringing violators of human rights to accountability.
- The U.S. Department of Interior is being forced to recognize the maltreatment of Native Americans regarding lands, culture, languages, religion and millions of dollars due them for timber, mining and other royalties.
- The number of U.S. students studying abroad has been rising, with language fluency expected and more destinations in the ‘Two-Thirds World’.
- Women are increasingly serving in top political positions (Presidents and Premiers in other nations) and as Governors, Cabinet officers, and members of Congress and legislatures in the U.S.

Jumping the Wall

by Elias

(Editor's Note: Elias is a Palestinian teacher who participated in a summer workshop at Hamline University for Palestinian and Israeli teachers developing a civic education curriculum for a constructive future in the Middle East. The pictures of the art work on the Wall were taken by Wajeh Murad.)

What if you were offered \$1000 to do it again? Without any doubt, rejection was my quick answer that reflected my reaction to what happened with me during the day I climbed the wall, Thursday the 14th of June. It is also the same reaction that made me write what happened.

I decided to pass the wall to go to the American Consulate Centre that lies in Jerusalem city to have an interview that was prepared by Vivian who works there, after I had been told by the Israeli Authority that it won't



give me permission to enter Jerusalem. I couldn't continue doing the visa without getting permission to enter Jerusalem to have the interview. I felt the disappointment that Dr. Nidal had when he knew about the possibility of not getting permission, for that means not having the chance to share in the Palestinian group which is going to have workshops at Hamline University in Minnesota. At the same time, Dr. Nidal made me feel that my existence is important and worth some risk!!

I decided to get closer to that monster which is called "the wall", although I sleep and wake up with the image of that wall in front of me, and Gilo Settlement, where the huge wall stands, is in front of my house.

Someone advised me to enter from Ramallah, so I took a taxi to the Calandia check point, beside the refugee camp. When I got there it appeared to the taxi drivers that I wanted to jump the wall, so three of them wanted to give me a ride to the dropping point. We drove for 10 minutes in the crowded streets. Suddenly the car stopped and the driver said to me seriously, "we have just arrived to nearest point, walk to the right about 50 meters and then you will find the wall in front of you". I stepped out of the car carefully and started to walk to the right. I felt that I was walking in a bombs field, and I remembered an image in

my imagination: an American soldier walking in the forests of Vietnam and expecting the appearance of the enemy any minute, like what we watch in the American Rambo movies.

I arrived and was shocked at what I saw. I found myself standing directly in front of the wall. I looked up to check out the height of this unbelievable and huge thing. It was so high that my eyes and body froze in place; I don't know how long it was before I turned away in a hurry to go back. "What am I doing here? Is it worth risking my life by jumping over this monster?" Then suddenly I stopped, and I went back to the wall. I said to myself, "it's worth it... yes it's worth it." I asked one of the people around, "Is here the best place to jump?" The answer was "yes," and he continued talking: "half an hour ago they caught 8 people who were trying to

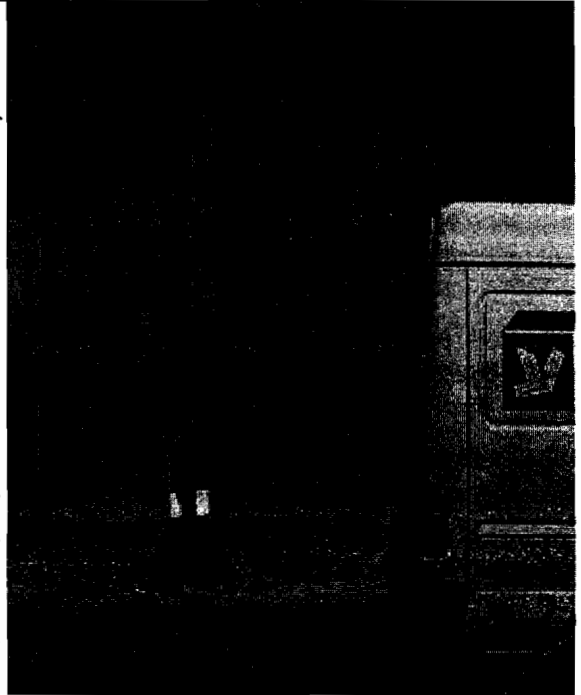
jump.”

I climbed the wall without any reject! And when I reached the top and I wanted to jump to the other side, I found myself trapped in the sky. It was then that I realized that the barb-wires had been crushed by my foot, and they were stuck in my trousers and my right hand. In the end I freed myself and my fear was focused on the possibility that there are soldiers on the other side of the wall.

Once down, I crossed the street while a big military police jeep was passing by very slowly. I realized that there was no hope for me to escape from them, because there is nobody else is around. I kept my breath and I started looking up. The jeep passed me in a strange but slow way, and I glanced at a soldier staring at me from the jeep... the time passed like an hour, and I assured myself, “everything went ok.”

I entered a shop and bought water to drink and tissues to wash my hand which was covered with blood because of those barbs that were stuck on my hand. Then I went jogging far away from this place, searching for a cab to drive me to the consulate centre.

On the way back to Jerusalem and after things turned out to be good, there is still one thought that doesn't leave my mind: was it worth it? In the normal situation you need 15 minutes to go to Jerusalem which is 7 KM northwest of Beit-Jala, and it took me 3.5 hours to get to Jerusalem!! This is unbelievable! I started to remember what happened to me during this day; I was like doing Rambo's role in the jungles! For \$1000 will you climb the wall again?! I'm not sure, but what I'm sure of is that one day this wall will vanish like Berlin's. Security and Peace are made by humans not by a wall!



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fairly nihilist in their attitude towards themselves and others. How much of this is brought about by the present war and the fact that we are leaving the next generation with a huge national debt, an environment under dire ecological crisis, and a political system that is fully controlled by moneyed interests – I can't say. But if I were younger, the anger at the way my generation has squandered the world's resources on greed and war might find me looking for other stronger ways to dissent. That said, I find that many of the young anarchists seem to be very politically naïve about the way property violence plays into the political strategies of the war-making political parties. What appears to some to be revolutionary merely is playing into the schemes of the reactionaries. And the masses of people between are alienated rather than motivated to join the anti-war cause. Throughout the week, it was rare when we heard any clear commands from the police. If demands to disburse or warnings about the imminent use of tear gas were clearly announced, many people who wanted to avoid this might have been able to leave. Was the sense of chaos and confusion deliberate? When peaceful dissent is thwarted, it is inevitable that other tactics will be used by some.

Most cops –even ninja turtles – showed remarkable restraint and patience after being taunted for hours- although some later beat up one young man involved in the earlier taunting. Some cops readily understood role of MnPT and thanked us for what we were trying to do.

This week proved to continually challenge my commitment to nonviolence (in good ways), gave me new appreciation of the challenges police face, and furthered my feelings that our nation needs a radical reawakening before we lose our democracy. I hope we can all learn and grow from this experience.

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**MINNESOTA FOR ANNUAL MEETING
"PEACE TEAMS AT THE RNC AND BEYOND"**

Sunday, November 9, 2008, 2:00-5:00 p.m.

Macalester-Plymouth United Church, 1658 Lincoln Ave., St. Paul, MN 55105

Panel presentation: "Inside the Peace Teams"
Special guests: Mark Johnson, National FOR
Reiner Schot, International FOR

*** "Peacemaker of the Year" Award: Katie Wojtan ***

Desserts and Discussion

Please join us for this celebration of building the nonviolence community in Minnesota!

North Country Peace Builder is produced quarterly by the board of the Minnesota Fellowship of Reconciliation. It is also available online at www.osb.org/for. Please email articles, photos, letters and comments to minnesotafor@gmail.com or to lgesling@hamline.edu with "NCPB" in the subject line; or write to Minnesota FOR, Attention: NCPB, PO Box 14792, Minneapolis, MN 55414-0792