

Judith Niechcial

Can you tell me just to begin with, a little bit about how you first became part of the peace movement?

The first thing I can remember is in 1982, I was doing a postgraduate degree at Cardiff University. And my tutor Maria Brenton was very active. And it was she that encouraged me to come with her to Embrace the Base. I think prior to that, I had been on peace marches, a very - you know Aldermaston type things, but I am very hazy about all that. My memories really start with going to Embrace the Base with Maria.

So that's how you first got involved at Greenham common was it?

Yes.

Embrace the Base?

Yes.

And what do you remember about that day?

Oh, my goodness, it was freezing cold. (Laughs). Um, I didn't realise how big the base was - you know, I had no idea, because I'd never been there before, I had no idea how enormous it was. And the fact that we actually did link or, link up arms all the way around without a gap. It was amazing. And but my main memory is that everybody had thick wooly hats on (laughs), and thick gloves, and were sort of shivering. And people were attaching things to the fence, because it's kind of cross wire, you know, fence. So people were putting up baby booties, or pictures of their children, or something sort of life enhancing in opposition to the sort of militaristic, aggressive er, horrors that were going on inside. So it was a, it was a very female based, very feminine um, occasion really. And I don't even remember if we had a picnic, or

what we did - because we were there - it seemed like ages, it was getting colder and colder. (Laughs). And I can't remember that we ate or drank anything at all. I don't think we did. And I have vague memories of meeting other people who I knew, but I can't remember now who they were.

And that was your first time at Greenham?

That was my first time there, yes.

And then after that, how many times did you return? How often were you there?

Well, I think we - I think I went about four or five times, on different occasions. Um, either supporting people in one of the gates, because you know they were different colour gates. And I remember being totally furious that was it Little Chef - or one of those horrible restaurant, didn't allow us to go and use their toilets or wash or anything, because of their opposition to what we were doing. And I remember being totally furious about that. But I don't actually remember much about those different occasions. I remember going down on the train to what was it not - where's the base near, it begins with an N?

Newbury.

What?

Newbury.

Newbury - that's right. Yes, yes. But it's, it's pretty vague in my memory now - those occasions, because we didn't actually - I didn't actually sleep there. So it was day trips.

You were there on a day?

Yes.

Do you remember much about the differences between the different gates?

No, I don't, no. I don't - no.

But you were at different places when you were there?

We were at different places at different times. Yeah.

Was it what you expected that first time?

Yes. Pretty much. Yes. Yes.

How important was it, do you think that Greenham was a women only space and a women only campaign?

Very important, very important, very important. Um, the way that decisions were made through you know, through discussion, sometimes very long discussion, and never having votes, and never having chair people, and never having this sort of masculine um, framework, which in business for example one does. Um, I thought that was, that was really brilliant. And I'm subsequently became a Quaker. And there are so many um, parallels between the way that Greenham women made made decisions, and the way Quakers make decisions, because we don't have votes either. We do everything by reaching unity. And if we don't reach unity, we don't make a decision - we postpone it to another time. And I think that's what they did at Greenham as well.

That everybody had a voice?

Yes.

And that everyone's opinion was respected?

Yes.

I imagine for a lot of women there, that must be the first time that they, they had a voice or any power or say?

Yes, yes. When was the miners' strike? Um, that was in the '70s, wasn't it? Or was it after? I can't remember now.

I think '84.

Oh, '84. So about the same time, because the miners' wives were also finding their voice more or less at the same time then weren't they?

Absolutely.

Because they did brilliantly.

We've found that there's been some some crossover with...

I bet, yes, yes, I'm sure. That's interesting.

What can you remember about the way the camp was run - sort of on a day to day basis? Did you get involved in any of the, you know, sort of chores or cooking?

No, I didn't, no - because I didn't stay there.

And what do you remember about the actual conditions when you were there? You mentioned the cold.

Fairly muddy! (Laughs).

Everyone's said that.

Yeah, yeah. Well, I think you remember, you remember the discomfort. I mean going there in the summer, but it doesn't kind of make the same impression as the winter time.

Do you think Greenham was a vehicle for women to claim some power back from more traditionally male dominated bodies like the government and the military?

Yes, yes, that was one of its important aspects, I think.

And what do you remember about the relationship between the women at Greenham and the men there - the military, and the police, and the bailiffs?

Um. Well, my experience of the police was, was different depending on who it was. Because I remember, I do remember sometimes, you know, women being dragged across the road and put in police vans and things. But on the other hand, I remember interesting conversations with the police. I don't think I ever had any contact with any of the soldiers inside the base. Um. But as you know, the police were - some were sympathetic and some weren't. And I'm sure they had different instructions on different days to do different things, but um, so it was mixed.

Were you, did you witness - or were you aware of any aggression or violence from the forces of law and order?

Well, there was some dragging. I do remember kind of dragging but then I didn't, I then never saw any hitting or kicking, or you know, any, any physical - other than the sort of, as I say, the pulling across the road, I remember that.

Were you ever present for any of the evictions when the bailiffs were there?

No, I never saw that. I heard about it of-course, but I never was there.

And what about the local residents? What do you remember about the relationship between the women and the, and the residents at Newbury?

Well, I think the only thing I can say is about the Little Chef or the Happy Eater, or whatever it was. (Laughs). I don't remember any discussions with any local residents. Sorry.

No, it's fine. Whatever you can remember is great. Obviously, everyone's memories and experiences are different. So tell me about um, the Women for Life on Earth group. Tell me a bit about that and how you got involved with the group.

Well, when I finished my degree, I came back to London to live in London. Um. Now let me think, when would that be? 80...'83. Um, And I had um, I was very interested in the women's peace movement, and I had a friend called Barbara, who was a leading light in the in the Southeast London branch of Women for Life on Earth. I mean, I know it was Women for Life on Earth, who initiated the first walk from Cardiff, but that was before I was involved. Just coincidental that I was in Cardiff, and they came from Cardiff, but they came earlier than I went. So, Barbara gathered together a group of er, very interesting women. We met in her house initially. And then we met in different - in each other's houses. And I remember doing - she was very creative. She was, she is I should say, she was a theatrical costumier. And she would, um, we would make badges. I might even have some of the badges. And we - she did rainbow coloured dip, dyeing. So we had rainbow coloured t shirts, and this is before the gay, gay people took over the rainbow - it was, it was very much a peace symbol in those days. Um. And, and we were used, I've got various minutes and things of the meetings, but at this distance, I can't really remember what we did other than were generally supportive to, to the women. And then we arranged this march, which was my main involvement. But that's not the same question. So...

Oh no, I do want you to, I do want you to tell us about that.

Shall I tell you about that now?

Please tell us about that march.

Okay. We arranged a march between Menwith - between Greenham common and Menwith Hill listening station up in Yorkshire, which was supposed to give a 4 minute warning of a nuclear attack - anything so ridiculous you ever heard of, but anyway. And it's still there, you know, it's got these great round things that - so that was a long, a long, long walk from Newbury to Yorkshire. And so that was just my Southeast London group who were doing it. So it involved a lot of organisation. And my job was to arrange the overnight stops along the way. So we worked out how far we were going to walk each day, and where we could stay. And a lot of those places, of-course, was Quaker Meeting Houses. So that's one of the reasons why I first got involved with Quakers. And um, then we also had a camper van where the children were. And my now husband, he was, we were just getting together and he was trying to impress me, about what a new man he was! So he volunteered to look after the children, which he had no experience whatsoever - I mean, they were a safeguarding nightmare now, you know! (Laughs). But it was, so he did that. And I was, I thought that was great.

So it worked!

(Laughs). Yeah. Worked for him, yeah. So we started at Greenham, we spent the night at Greenham prior to setting off, and then we walked with this banner. There we are (picks something up), that's the...

Oh that's amazing. Was that at the front all the time?

Yeah, yes, I think so. So we were a group of about twelve I guess, ten or twelve, not very long - not very many. We made all these banners ourselves though you know with Barb's creativity, her great help. And um, it was a, it was a really lovely - it was in the summer as you can see,

we're in shorts and things. So it was lovely. I didn't actually go the whole way, because I had to come back for my children. I think I came back for - roundabout Leicestershire or somewhere in the Midlands, I had to give up. But they persevered and they went all the way. And it all worked. It was huge comradeship, you know, it was just - because we were bedding down on floors in sleeping bags and, you know, having bonfires in the evening in the Quaker Meeting House grounds or wherever we were. Yeah, it was a great experience. I mean, there was no - I don't think there was any publicity. You know, I can't, I don't think we ever had - maybe some local, local newspapers heard about it and took some photos, but I really don't know. It was more - it was more us doing something that felt meaningful, you know, to draw attention to the links between the whole militaristic um, setup, really.

And you organised all the overnights?

Yeah, that was my job.

Did you find people receptive to what you were doing?

Yes, yes. But then we chose quite carefully who to ask (laughs)! We didn't ask the local Conservative association!

(Laughs). I'm sure that would have been somewhat of a different story.

Yeah. (Laughs).

What do you remember about the media coverage of Greenham generally at the time, and the way the women were portrayed?

It was mixed. I think it was mixed. There was a, there was a lot of, I think a lot of um, a lot of media felt threatened. Um. And a lot of men said 'Well, we want to be part of it. Why can't we be part of it? We, we agree with you, you know, we don't want these cruise missiles here at all, either. Why can't we join in?' But we, you know, they were always just firmly told it was a women's - I think there were one or two

occasions where it was a mixed, mixed demo, but I don't remember any of that - I didn't, I wasn't part of any of that.

So how important, I guess this also related to the fact that it was a women only campaign. How important was the use of creativity, the use of singing and of art?

Oh, that was, that was so much part of it. All these songs, you know, they were, there was a whole song book that we had. And I'm quite keen on singing. So I used to really enjoy that. Yes, I used to love that one. Yeah.

I suppose it must have been a way to raise morale, but also make your point.

Yes. And bringing people together as well.

Do you think there's any chance that the camp might have been in some ways infiltrated or sabotage?

I don't know about that. I don't know.

And in terms of political activism, what do you think has been learned from Greenham, and do you think it's impacted on, on the future generations of activists and political campaigners?

Well, I think that I mean, even up to now, I mean, say for example, in the Iraq War demo, you know, when Blair was going to go, when there were thousands and thousands of people demonstrating against that, and various, you know, marches to support the NHS or er, the Women's March that took place after Trump's um - I mean, I don't know whether there's, whether the fact that the Greenham demo was so long and so high profile really, whether that then influenced people, activist people to do more out on the streets, um - expression of their political views. I can't say whether that was a cause and effect. But I mean, I would like to think that the Greenham women inspired younger people coming

along, to think that public demonstration of - on important issues was worth doing. Because the missiles didn't stay. They went. So (laughs).

Absolutely.

Yeah.

Why do you think it is that the Suffrage movement has been so remembered and celebrated, whereas the peace movement hasn't in anything like the same way?

I never thought of that. I mean, the Suffrage, Suffrage movement - I mean, that was, I think that's really important. I'm glad that it has been, because it's been a significant anniversary, hasn't it, last year? Err - has the peace movement not been celebrated - it never occurred to me.

Not perhaps in the same way.

No.

You may disagree.

Well, I suppose one difference is that the Suffrage movement had identified leaders, you know, the Pankhursts were sort of, you know, everybody knows about them. Whereas Greenham, because it was more, there wasn't - there weren't leading women who sort of were in the public eye.

That's interesting. No personalities?

Yes. It was a collective. It was a collective movement, rather than a led movement, wasn't it?

Very much so.

It sort of came up from the bottom. It was a grass roots, rather than led by aristocratic women, who had the public um, platform already almost - because of their position in society. Maybe that's the reason. I'd never thought of it, but maybe that's the reason

No, that makes a lot of sense. Do you remember from your time at Greenham, whether any of the women there had problems with partners or families because of their involvement there?

Oh, I'm sure they did. And I know that a lot had er, really problematic feelings about leaving their children. Um. And maybe men resenting the fact that they were made to do childcare when they didn't want to or weren't able to. I think, you know, women with young children especially, that was really hard. Especially if they were in, you know, resident there for long periods of time, leaving their children behind. Um. It was, that was really problematic.

Do you remember there being children at the base the times you were there?

Yes, I do. Yes, there were. But I think quite a number of women had reservations about having their children with them under those circumstances. Err, not very easy, changing nappies and sterilising bottles and things in those circumstances, so it - that that was a problem. Um, the women, the Women for Life on Earth group that I was with, most of the women in it - I don't remember that - some of them were, quite a lot of them were lesbians, um, so had female partners rather than male partners. But I don't remember any of my - in the people that I knew closely, I don't remember any great conflicts, but I should imagine there were.

Do you remember there being any conflicts or disagreements at the, at the peace camp between the campaigners at all?

No, I don't, I don't. I'm sure there must have been, but I didn't have any experience of that.

I'm sure. And from your time there, do you remember there ever being any sort of emergencies medical emergencies or..?

No, because no, not on the days that I was there - because I was only there for days, and this one night - overnight before, so I am not really qualified to speak about how life was, you know, day to day in the camp.

No, it's only your memories we need. Is there one image, or one word, or one memory that sums up your Greenham experience for you?

Well, there's, what's that song. (Hums song). (Sings) 'And give peace a chance'. How does that go?

The John Lennon song?

Yeah.

(Sings) 'All we are saying...' that one?

That one. That's what sticks in my mind. Yeah.

Was that sung a lot?

We sang it a lot on the march, we sang that a lot.

And we're asking everyone this, can you explain why you think it's important that Greenham is remembered by subsequent generations?

(Sighs). The most important thing is that a stand was taken against hugely expensive, completely unnecessary, dangerous weapons of war. Um. Which, I mean they shouldn't be in America, let alone here. They shouldn't be anywhere. And oh talking about demonstrations - anti Trident demos, for example. Um. I just think it is so important that a stand was taken visibly against, and by large numbers of people, against these, you know, the politicians thinking it's okay to have these, these

weapons, you know, costing billions. I mean, how is it Trident is now what, £3 billion or something - unbelievable sums of money for a thing that wouldn't work anyway. And it's just so important that a stand is taken against that in a visible way. And the fact that it was women is a, you know, an extra plus. But the - more importantly is that people stand up and say 'No', to these, the imposition of these ridiculous and terrible things.

Do you think it would have been as successful a campaign had it not been women only?

No, I don't. No, it was the fact that it was women only that was important, I think.

And the means of campaigning and the non-violence.

It would have been very different, if it had been mixed.

(Edit in recording).

So this is something that I wrote about Women for Life on Earth in 19, May 1984. What is Women for Life on Earth? Well, first of all, we are not a group, in inverted commas. There are many WFLOE groups, that's Women for Life on Earth, and individuals scattered all over the country, and increasingly the world. We're not a campaign either, in the classical political sense, we don't focus on a single issue, or operate out of a campaign office somewhere. Our protest is primarily anti-nuclear. But we are opposed to the many forms of violence in our society, that threaten us as women and threaten all life on Earth. As for what we do, this differs from region to region. Some of us work on local environmental issues from a feminist perspective. Others are deeply involved in the peace movement, supporting or living at Greenham, or one of the other bases. Yet others are trying to disseminate information on ecological or peace issues to an ever growing number of women, through public meetings, educational events or local newsletters. What's certain is that with more and more women waking up to the

threats raged against life on Earth, and connecting this with their feelings and experiences as women, the range of activities and concerns gets more and more complex. WFLOE is a fine web of connections between issues and people. More precisely, perhaps, we are an experiment in communication. Being locally rooted and remaining autonomous gives us strength of diversity, with enthusiasm and energy generated from our own hearts and lives. Not from some top heavy bureaucracy. Thus, WFLOE has grown in the most organic way possible, spontaneously and with no advanced planning.

Wow! (Laughs)

I had forgotten that completely.

That's marvellous. Tell me about this fabulous document you've just handed to us, with the very complicated diagram of telephone numbers on it. What was that about or for?

Well, it was in case, in case there was an occasion where the missiles were actually going to be deployed. Um. It was a kind of alert, so we'd all alert each other. I think that was the base - what was the cause of it. But it was a very involved ring of who rings who, and then who rings who, and in a circular thing. Because this was before the internet and social media.

And mobiles.

And mobile phones. Yes, exactly. So that's all I remember about that. (Looks at papers). Southeast London Women for Life on Earth, there's a booklet. 'Old and strong. She goes on and on and on. You can't kill the spirit. She's like a mountain.' That's one of the songs that goes around and round. Here we are. You were asking about arrests and things. So this was one of them. 'Two Greenham women are scapegoats' - 29th of October. 'Gloria and Jill were arrested and charged with causing £25 of criminal damage to the 9 mile perimeter fence at USAF Greenham common, in a major demonstration by 2000

women on October 29th '83'. Oh, gosh 'Only when they presented themselves to Newbury Magistrate's Court on the 15th March 1984, to face trial, were they and their lawyers informed that the charge had been changed to £5397.65 criminal damage, in joint enterprise with persons unknown to eighty one sections of the perimeter fence. Rather than proceed with this unexpected charge, their only option was to take their case to the Crown Court, hoping for a fairer trial by jury.' 'How you can help - tell everyone about this case. Your trade union can contract the local press'. God, I'd forgotten about that all together.

And that's a leaflet...

Got a picture of them pulling the fence down.

I guess that leaflet that you've, you've just read out was obviously for publicity purposes to raise awareness?

Yes, yes.

And to call for assistance?

Yeah. The London Greenham office produced it - 144 Caledonian Road. Oh, that's a document - the documentary film. You know about that, I'm sure?

Carry Greenham Home.

Yeah. Messages from Menwith. Oh, here's a picture of Menwith Hill, with all those domes.

Oh yes. I know it, actually, I used to live in Yorkshire.

Oh, did you? Yeah. Greenham common to Menwith Hill, here we are stuff - we planning stuff.

So that's documentation actually from your organising the...

Yes, yes.

How marvellous that you've kept all this.

Well, it's important, isn't it? It's history.

Absolutely.

Oh, here's my plan, here's my plan for where we - it's invisible because it was done on carbon paper. (Laughs). So that was, that was all part of the planning for the march, I think.

Wow that's just such a wonderful collection.