

Sarah Green

Can you tell me to start with how did you first get involved with the peace movement?

Okay, well, in the end of the '70s, beginning of the '80s, there was, there were a lot of CND movement groups. And also there were a lot of women's peace groups. And I was in a women's peace group in Sheffield, before the Women For Life On Earth march happened. So I was already in a peace group, a women's peace group. Yes. So, I mean, yes, it became, it was something, I think, very widespread at that point in time that people were forming groups because they were so concerned about the nuclear proliferation and the real threat of nuclear war at that time.

And when was the first time you heard about Greenham common or went to Greenham common?

I think it was, there was a very big rally in Hyde Park in the October, and I don't know if I knew about Greenham before that, but I certainly knew about it then. And I went home from that march, that rally and I gave in my notice, which was a month's notice - I was working in a care home at that point. And I moved to Greenham the beginning of December 1981.

And how long were you there for?

I was there for about 5 years.

Wow, did you come and go, or stay for most of the time?

No, I lived there.

The whole time?

Yes.

What was it about Greenham?

I mean, at the end, I came and went because it was getting very difficult, because by that time I had my son.

Yeah. And what was it about Greenham that made you stay so long?

Um, I stayed because people were doing something about an urgent problem.

Was it what you expected?

Um, I don't know, I don't know what I expected. No. Um, I can't really answer that question.

Were you were based at one particular gate, or did you move around the camps while you were there?

I was at the Main Gate, which became the Yellow Gate. I was there the whole time.

I see. How important was it, do you think generally that Greenham was a women only space, and was that important for you personally?

Well, when I first went there, I mean, I think I visited before I actually moved there at the beginning of the December, so I would have been there the, the November. When I first went there, it wasn't a women only space. It wasn't a women only camp. There was um, issues that happened - I can't tell you which month it was. And at that point, men were asked to move to the Green Gate. And they didn't want to move to the Green Gate. They all went back to London. And it became a women only space after that. So when I moved it wasn't a woman only space.

Was a collective decision to make it a women only space?

It was collective among the women, because the men left.

And do you think that it would have been a very different protest had that not happened?

Yes, I think so.

So tell me a little bit about how the camp was run on a sort of day to day basis, just with regards to the everyday living, the cooking, the sleeping arrangements, the chores.

It was quite organic. Um, people just joined in and did what was needed to be done. And people tended to be in different groups. But there was nothing, there was no official rotas, or this sort of thing. It all just seemed to work. People chipped in.

What do you remember about the living conditions? I imagine, particularly during the winter, it must have been sometimes challenging to be there.

Well, I've just spent a year in a tent on the side of a road in Harefield with, in a way, much worse living conditions. Because at least when we were there - it depends which year you're talking about, because there were years when we were being evicted all the time. Um. But if there's a group of you who are solidly together, it's quite easy to survive. So, no, I didn't find them particularly challenging. I found them quite liberating, to know that, for instance, you could sleep outdoors in a Gore-tex bag and be perfectly comfortable.

So you never, ever thought about leaving?

No, no, no. And also you've got to remember I was a lot younger then (laughs). The age I am now, I'm 63, and I've just been in the, you know, out of doors for another year. And I'm finding it a lot harder. So I'm

appreciating people like Sarah Hipperson, and Jane Dennett, people like that, who were quite a lot older at the time, and they were doing it.

I see. And I understand at the camp that the decisions were usually taken collectively with everyone's opinion being sought and listened to. Do you think that was an effective way of doing it, and without ever any disagreements about...

Well there certainly was, I don't think it started off being very collective. I think we had to learn that. And, and you learn as you go along.

Right. Do you think that the women found Greenham a means to claim back some power from traditionally male dominated bodies, like the government and the military?

Um, I think it was good to be a space where there was another reality. For instance, I'm gay. Um, there were, I would say, 50/50 gay women, straight women. But it wasn't a, a space that was normal to be heterosexual. Which I think it gives you a certain sense of liberation, that you're not making excuses for things. You know, you're, you're on a equal with everyone else.

So it became an important space for people to really be themselves and explore their own personalities?

Yes, yes.

And indeed, do you think it was a place where women were able to explore and express their sexuality and pursue relationships?

I think it was. It was normalised.

How wonderful. Do you know if any of the women there that you're aware of had conflicts with partners or families because of their involvement at Greenham?

Yes, there were some, definitely. Especially people who had children at home. There were people that had had their children taken from them basically. There were several people that that happened to.

Wow. So that that would be their sort of partner or families actively....

Yes.

...keeping them from their, from their children because of it?

Yes. Or legally take them off them.

Because of their involvement at Greenham?

Yes. I mean, there was the bad mother thing. That was one of the things they were throwing at us. Yes.

And were there children at the camp with their mothers?

Um, it depends which - yes, there was. Yeah, there was - I don't know if you've interviewed Beatrice?

I haven't personally.

Her little twins were there for a long time. Um. Obviously, Jay was there for quite a long time after he was born there. Hero's son was there. Um, there weren't a lot of children but there were children.

Do you think that experience for the children at the camp was of benefit to them? A different way of living, of looking at life?

I think, I think it certainly was, apart from the - I believe it was in 1985. I believe that we were targeted with some sort of um, microwave weaponry. Because we all went quite crazy at that point. To the point that I felt it was an unsafe place for my son.

Is that what was known as zapping, I believe?

Yes, yes. I certainly experienced that. Um, but we've never been able to prove what what happened.

So what was the relationship like between the women of the camp and some of the men around you - the police, the military, the bailiffs?

Um...we didn't have very much to do with them, really. And when we did it was trying to be - I mean, you know, sometimes we had to be confrontational, but on an ordinary day to day level, we tried to defuse things.

Yeah. And you mentioned a period of constantly being evicted. Um, what was that experience like? What do you remember about about the bailiffs then?

They started off being very, very harsh and thinking they could get rid of us. And then by the end of, I don't know, it went on for so many months, by the end of it, they were really rubbish collectors. They would just come and take the bits that we'd put ready for them as the rubbish bags. And we'd pick everything else up and go and stand on the, you know, the allocated bits. So really, it didn't work. And they went from bailiffs to rubbish collectors.

So the Greenham women played the system to their advantage?

Yes.

Brilliant. How were um, illnesses or injuries dealt with? If people at the camp needed medical attention, what would happen then?

Well, there were safe houses - there was someone up the road who we'd go to if we felt that we needed a night in house. There were several houses where we could go.

Where they local residents?

Yes, local residents, local woman who were also Greenham women.

And what was the relationship like generally with the, with the other people around Newbury?

It was a bit difficult to be honest, because there was a lot of people who were obviously um, making money from the American military. And also it's a very Conservative area. So that was a lot of name calling and looking down their noses and you know, all of that, but it was probably very split, to be honest.

Did you encounter any of the the local vigilantes at any time?

Yes, yes. I was there at a time when a car, a sort of van lorry thingy pulled up and just spread - it was offal. All over, all over.

How much do you think that sort of thing was motivated by misogyny - that this was a group of women?

I think it was actually probably paid for by the military. I think it was a tactic to get rid of us. You know, I don't - yeah, it was all a tactic to get rid of us.

So on that subject, do you think that the camp was ever infiltrated, or..?

I think it was harder to infiltrate at that point in history, as it was a women only camp - that was one of the things that safeguarded it. But I think possibly was.

That there were attempts to sabotage the the protest and the work going on?

And to find out what - everything that was happening. I don't know whether - I'm really not quite sure about that, whether, but there was

always that possibility, but we had nothing to hide. So, you know, it didn't matter that much. There was certainly people that came around pretending they were ordinary people, and they were actually the press. And then they would be writing all sorts of things in the press later. And I mean, I had that happen to me quite a few times, that Sarah green said this, and they always made me look like an idiot. But I was talking to just someone from the street, and I wasn't really answering the questions, because I didn't know who they were.

So people from the media would, would come in incognito and not tell you they were?

Yes.

With a specific intention of misrepresenting?

Yes.

How do you think generally though that Greenham was represented in the press at the time, and since?

I think - well the one I remember was the 'woolly headed women'. We were looked at as if we were stupid. And that we didn't know what we were doing. But I think because the project - just like the one I'm fighting now, HS2 - 80% of people were against cruise missiles, especially American cruise missiles on British soil. It was difficult to undermine us totally.

Do you think there were any changes as the campaign went on in the media? Or were they always determined to misrepresent?

I think that it changed after Embrace the Base. Because that level of support, that level of women saying the same thing at the same time, I don't think that's ever happened before or since - 30,000 women holding hands. That's powerful.

What do you remember about that day?

Oh, I remember coach upon coach upon coach full of women arriving. And I was just so happy because I had been in the first meeting where we decided to do it. And that was in the September. So that was only September, October, November, December, really 3 months, really. And there was less than 10 people in that first meeting. And we decided to ask 10 women to ask 10 women to us 10 women, because it was before the mobile phones, before computers. And I've been racking my brains about this. Because we'd been trying to get people for other things now, and you just can't do it. Whereas there it was word of mouth because there were the groups. We had speakers speakers going out to the women's peace groups, women going out to CND groups all over the country. And we had a little book with speakers. So if anyone came and said they want a speaker on a certain day you'd write it in the book, and someone would volunteer, or two women would go. And we had speakers everywhere. And we managed 30,000 - and that was the, that was the vision. It was Eleanor, who had the vision of 30,000 women holding hands around that base. And that was in the September. And then on December the 12th 1982, 30,000 women held hands around the base.

That must have been a very joyful day, and also a feeling of empowerment for the people there, I guess?

It was, it was achievement. And it was unity. And we were all speaking with the same voice by our actions.

Were you involved in other non-violent direct action campaigns at all the time that you were there?

Yes. You mean the other actions that took place?

Um hum.

Well for quite a lot of them I was in the group that first went to prison. The people that first got arrested - I think it was the first actual eviction that I was arrested at. And people have been arrested before - they'd been arrested at the Easter action, but their court case was put off. So ours was the first court case, and we were charged with breach of the peace. There were, I believe four of us. There could have been five of us, but one person pleaded guilty because she had children. We all pleaded not guilty. We were advised by our solicitor that we could get 6 months in prison. Um. But we still said not guilty. And we, in-fact, only got it was either 7 days or 14 days, it was minimal.

What do you remember about being in prison?

It was very informative. And it wasn't nearly as bad as being in the police cells. Because again, it was an all women environment. I'm pretty good with people. I like talking with people. Um, yeah, it was it was fine. I had quite a good time. Met people, learnt a lot about the system. And I think I came out thinking absolutely everyone should experience what prison's like, because maybe we can improve the system. You know, it doesn't serve any purpose the way it is at the moment.

Back to the non-violent direct action campaigns, was it important that every individual woman at Greenham was able to decide for herself what she was involved in and what she wasn't?

Well you couldn't do it any other way.

But was there ever any, any frictions over some people being less involved than others?

No.

Everyone's decision was respected?

Well, absolutely. And also, people didn't always know what other people were doing. It was only certain actions like the Embrace the Base or the taking down the fence, or cruise watch or things like that, that everyone knew about. But other things people just did. There was a lot of autonomy as long as you stuck to the same principles.

Of the non-violent direct action?

Yes.

I understand that, particularly for the people that were involved in, in the actions that there was frequent aggression and violence from the, from the military and the police. Did you experience that while you were there?

It was, I mean, oh - I can only really compare it to what we're going through now. Um. I mean, it was difficult breaking into a military base, it was actually not that difficult. But you were faced the other side of the fence with men with guns. And in some places, two layers of different type of men with guns - the British and then the inner fence would be the Americans. And there would be razor wire and there would be, you know, a lot of things that could potentially hurt you. So in that respect, it was, it was a serious environment. Um. I mean, they, they wouldn't come out and attack you or anything. We had vigilante attacks, which could have been connected. But no, most of the time, the nearer you know if you've got to a certain level - if you were inside the base, you know, there would be shouting at you and all of this, but we weren't, I was never physically attacked. I was manhandled by the police very often. But I don't know, I think, I think I just became normalised to it.

Yeah. Were you ever genuinely scared for your safety at any time?

I think I was, as I say, in 1985. When I do think we were being attacked with something we didn't understand. Because there were days where we'd know that there was going to be some visit or some official thing, and we'd all be asleep, you know, totally out of character. Um. And then

we'd all feel really strange and, you know, that sort of thing. And yes, I think that that was very frightening. The other thing was when Dee Sainsbury got murdered, that was a terrible time. I'd actually seen her that morning - she was, she was hitchhiking back, no she wasn't hitchhiking. That was the thing. She was at Victoria coach station, she was getting the bus back, because I just arrived off a bus. And then she was found dead on the golf course near Oxford, because they said she was hitching - hitchhiking. Well she wasn't hitchhiking as far as I knew. And nothing about that ever made sense. And in the court case, someone went to jail for a very long time, but they never gave any evidence. We never knew what happened, who that person was - when you know. And that could have been any of us.

That must have been a very sad and tragic time. Did it obviously affect morale and, and people's emotions at the camp?

Yes. I mean, she was from - she stayed most of the time at Blue Gate. And yeah, people were absolutely devastated. Um. I remember a lot of screaming. A lot of celebrating her life as well.

Yeah.

But, yeah, that sort of thing you don't forget.

Of-course. How important was creativity as part of the activism at Greenham? The, the singing, the artwork?

I think the singing, I think the music was very important because it was a different day and age, you didn't have a lot of er, machines that will just play all your records for you. You know, I loved the marching band, there was a marching band that came to a lot of events. And so you would be walking down the street in Newbury or something but the marching band was all there you know, and, and that was so empowering and so wonderful. Um. Singing. Yeah, that's so good for morale and, and also, just the - all the decorating fence, the making webs. All of that was a pleasure.

And it seems a whole new way of performing political activism. To me, it seems that's, that was the importance of it being a woman only space - that...

See it was important to that at that moment in time, it wouldn't have worked otherwise. But I think that was a moment in time, because I think that sexual politics and whole understanding of gender has moved on so much. I hope it has. Because we're all everything.

Now, I believe you had a unique experience at Greenham in that your baby was born there.

Yes.

Was that deliberate conscious choice on your behalf?

Yes.

Why was it important to you that he was born there?

Well, that's where I was living.

But you never thought of going anywhere else for the birth?

No. And I think that was partly because it was my first child. So I didn't know how difficult it was going to be. (Laughs). You have this sort of idealistic view that everything's fine. So, no, that was probably a sort of naive thing to do. But yeah, it was fine. Yeah.

To be surrounded by the, the women at the base rather than faceless...

Well, it was in a bender, and Jay was born in a bender. May, but it was a very cold, very cold night. He was fine.

So there's a beautiful image of you in them in the film, Carry Greenham Home where he's just been born and you're feeding him, and you look so calm, so serene - is that how you felt?

Yes. (Laughs).

What do you remember about that, about that day?

Um. Oh, I was just so glad it was over. I mean, anyone who's had a baby knows that. No, I didn't realise it was gonna be so difficult.

You're glad it was there, though?

Yes, yeah. Mind you my second baby I had in hospital.

Different experience?

Yes. (Laughs). Better safe than sorry.

I see. And how long were you there at the camp after your, your first baby was born there - how long did you stay?

Well yes for about a year and a half, no 2 years, he had his second birthday there, so it was 2 years - 2 and a half years, I think.

That must have been a fantastic childhood for him, growing up surrounded by these amazing warrior women?

I think so, I think it was fine. I mean, I did ask him about that yesterday. And he said, well he doesn't really remember much about it - just things that are prompted by photographs, but he appreciated being brought up by people who had principles, and fought for something important for everyone, for humanity, for nature. You know, and he's a very principled person.

So was it because of him that you finally decided to leave the camp?

Yes. Yeah.

And what, what did you feel about it looking back? What did you miss once you'd gone? What did you miss the most?

I don't know if I missed anything at that point. I think I was just moving forward.

Busy with your child?

Yes, I don't know. I mean, as I say, I felt it was unsafe for him. And I felt that the um, Secret Service the military, they were really trying to get at everyone, and anyone that they could see as being there for a long time, or maybe being named in any of the newspapers, they tried to get at their personal life in such a way to divide. Yeah, so I had to do what I had to do at that point.

Would it be fair to say you were genuinely concerned about his safety?

Yes, definitely.

Is there one particular image or memory that stands out for you about your time at Greenham?

So many. Um, no there's so many.

So many. And is there one word that you could summon up to....

No!

Can't sum it up in one word! In terms of political activism...

I think it was learning.

Learning.

Yes.

Ah, excellent. And that leads me neatly on to this question in terms of political activism, then, what do you think we have learned from Greenham? And has it been an influence on subsequent generations of political activists?

I think it has. I think it's probably been more a learning experience for the government, and the police, because they tested out so many things on us. And they learned because they join all of their um, different activities against protesters um, on one database. And on one sort of system, whereas we're all divided. And I do think that's what we've got to learn. And, you know, humanity is facing extinction. If we can't join together now, and we've got to join together, not only with all the activists, with all the general population, but with the government, with police, we've all got to change at this point in history. You know, maybe Greenham was like the practice run. But I do believe that's how active we've got to get now.

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

Because we haven't changed as a society into a peaceful society. We're still based on war. We're still based on making weapons. We're still based on one nation competing with another nation. We haven't changed. Whereas we are so proud of being a democracy.

And there's no money to be made in peace.

Well there is. There's no money to be made, if we continue down the way we're going, because we're going to destroy everything.

I mean from the you know, from the...

Corporations.

Corporations and the government.

The corporations and the government has to just change. And the people can make that change because we are a democracy. Everyone can vote in a different way. We don't have to vote for the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democratic Party, we don't have to, you know, none of that. We don't have to vote for them, but we can all vote.

Oh, yeah, I agree wholeheartedly. I can't imagine not voting. But yeah. Very little choice.

But we have to make the choice - we can all stand.

I think that's the way forward...

I'm a candidate for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner. This area. I don't live in this area. I live in the next area, but this is the area being devastated. You know, we've got, we've got everything being taken from here - 80 acres of wet woodland and wetland, you know, that cleans the water of London, the London drinking water - 22% is being threatened here. So I'm standing.

That's amazing. Do you do you think that your time at Greenham has influenced that - the power, the confidence?

It gave me a lot of strength, a lot of confidence, a lot of knowledge and it was a learning experience. And, and I think we've all got to put that into practice if we can.

Oh, I wish you the very best of luck with it.

Yes. I don't want to be an MP. It's not that. I really don't. But I want to...

You want to change things?

Things need changing 100%. We have to have a future. If we, if we don't save nature. We have no future.

Absolutely right. One last question that - the one we're asking everyone. Can you explain why you think it's so important that Greenham is remembered by subsequent generations?

Because we achieved something. Because 30,000 women did hold hands around the base. Because we don't know if they ever bought the real missiles in or not, but they certainly took them away. We know that the base is no longer a base, it's common land. We know that we won in the House of Lords. We know that we made a difference.