

Baltimore peace activist faces prison for demonstration

By George P. Matysek Jr.

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One year ago on All Souls' Day, Susan Crane used a bolt cutter to rip open chain-link fences at a U.S. Navy nuclear weapons storage depot in Bangor, Wash.

Working with two Jesuit priests, a Sacred Heart Sister and another lay woman, the Baltimore woman helped sprinkle blood on the property and symbolically hammered on roadways and fences. The Catholic peace activists unfurled a banner that declared Trident missiles to be "illegal" and "immoral." They also scattered sunflower seeds - the international symbol of nonviolence.

"These nuclear weapons indiscriminately kill civilians," said Crane, speaking in a Nov. 29 phone interview with The Catholic Review from Tacoma, Wash.

"Whole cities the size of Baltimore or Los Angeles could be destroyed," she said, noting that the naval base broken into housed more than 2,300 nuclear warheads.

"Not only are these weapons indiscriminate," she said, "they can't be controlled in time and space. That makes them very illegal by humanitarian law and treaties."

Crane belongs to "Disarm Now Plowshares" a non-violent group that takes its name from a passage in Isaiah that foretells of an era of peace. She and the other protestors are facing serious federal charges - conspiracy, trespass, destruction of property on a naval installation and degradation of government property.

The defendants, who come from all over the country, have entered pleas of "not guilty." Their trial starts Dec. 7 in the U.S. District Court, Western District of Washington at Tacoma.

Crane is a longtime resident of Jonah House in Baltimore, a community of nonviolent peace activists. She worships at St. Peter Claver in West Baltimore and several other

area parishes.

The special education teacher, who has served five years in prison for similar protests including a 1999 action at the Warfield Air National Guard base in Middle River, knows she is facing the possibility a long prison sentence. She has no regrets.

Crane likened her actions to cutting the lines to the gas chambers that killed millions of Jews during World War II.

“These weapons are flying ovens,” she said, “and when they land, they are every bit as devastating as the gas ovens in Germany.”

Crane said the government is wasting money on “illegal” weaponry.

“We are spending so much money on war-making that we don’t have money to fix the infrastructure in our cities and make jobs for people and have good schools and healthcare,” Crane said. “You can see the grinding poverty in West Baltimore every day.”

Crane rejected the notion that her actions are extreme.

“We’ve tried fasting and talking and war tax resistance and standing on a street corner with signs and education events,” she said. “All of those things are important, but when you look at social change movement – unions or civil rights – at a certain point people decide that’s not enough. You have to do more.”

The 67-year-old woman said alarms should be raised about the security of nuclear weapons.

“The five of us (activists) are not youngsters,” she said, “and the fact we could get right into this area is pretty amazing. It was an amazing breach of security. It might make people think about how safe our weapons really are.”

The most difficult part of facing possible prison time would be not getting to see her two children, Crane said. Her first grandchild is due Dec. 9 – two days after her trial begins.

“They have been very supportive of what I’m doing,” she said.

Crane praised Pope Benedict XVI and Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien for speaking against nuclear weapons.

"I think it's going to take all of us," she said. "You don't get rid of weapons tomorrow, but we should begin a good faith effort. Jesus tells us to love our enemies. Nonviolent solutions are the only solutions to our problems."

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