

Peace activist Peter DeMott dead after fall

Patrick O'Neill | Feb. 23, 2009

Ithaca, N.Y., peace activist Peter DeMott, 62, died Feb. 19 after a fall while working in a tree. His wife, Ellen Grady, was able to see her husband before he went into surgery at a Pennsylvania hospital where he was airlifted following the accident. DeMott, a father of four daughters, died during the surgery.

DeMott was a veteran Catholic peace activist who spent time in prison for numerous anti-war protests. A Vietnam veteran, DeMott lived and worked with the late Philip Berrigan and Elizabeth McAlister at Baltimore's Jonah House as part of the Atlantic Life Communities before settling in Ithaca with his family.

DeMott was born in Washington, DC, but grew up mostly in Minnesota and Nebraska. After graduating from high school DeMott joined the Marine Corps. He spent most of 1969 in Vietnam as a communications specialist.

In a 2005 personal biography, DeMott wrote: " Upon completing my enlistment in the Marines I joined the Army where I received training as a linguist and an assignment to a NATO post in Ankara, Turkey. My experience in the military convinced me of the futility of war and of the sad misallocation of resources which war making requires.

"In 1979, I joined the Catholic Worker movement and began to work nonviolently for justice and peace by addressing some of the root causes of poverty, unemployment and homelessness. I am married to Ellen Grady. We have four daughters (Marie, Kate, Nora and Saoirse) ... In the fall of 2003, I traveled to Iraq as part of a Christian Peacemaker Team delegation and saw firsthand the terrible impact of the aggressive war of invasion which the US had launched on that country. My faith in God prompts me to work for a world which unifies us all by ties of love and solidarity and mutual cooperation."

DeMott gained notoriety in 1980 when he was at the General Dynamics Electric Boat shipyard in Groton, CT, saw some keys in the ignition of a shipyard van, started the van and rammed it into the body of a Trident submarine in what he called a spontaneous act of disarmament. In 1982, DeMott was a member of Plowshares Number Four, also at Groton, CT, when a group of seven activists, including his wife-to-be, hammered on another Trident submarine. The action resulted in a prison sentence for DeMott.

Last December 29, DeMott was among a group of activists arrested at the Pentagon during a Holy Innocents retreat. He was to appear in court March 6.

DeMott was the brother of the late Maryknoll Fr. Stephen DeMott, a missionary and former editor of Maryknoll Magazine.

"I will miss Peter deeply," said Durham, NC peace activist Beth Brockman, who with DeMott and five others were arrested at an Oct. 20, 2007 demonstration at the headquarters of Blackwater USA in Moyock, NC, near the Virginia border. "Like the meaning of his name, he was a rock, a real stable presence for me, and in the nonviolent community. It is hard to imagine the depth of grief that Ellen and the girls must feel, that the Ithaca community must feel."

(Patrick O'Neill is a regular NCR contributor.)

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