NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# The place of nonviolent civil disobedience in today's culture

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Mar. 1, 2012 Young Voices

I used to travel annually to Fort Benning, Ga., for the annual vigil at the gates of the School of the Americas, now called the Western Hemispheric Institute for Security Cooperation, or WHISC. I was always fascinated with the participants who opted to "cross the line" onto the military base in an effort to give a voice to the voiceless. This typically meant that folks would be arrested and sometimes issued a citation or sentenced to serving time in prison.

I received an email Wednesday from Hendrik Voss of the School of the Americas Watch, the primary advocacy group trying to shut down the School of the Americas. His email encouraged people to send letters to a woman in prison to let her know that she is not alone in her efforts to seek peace and justice.

It reminded me of a time when I used to spend a lot of time writing to nonviolent resisters. I realized early on that I agree with their values but would never have the gumption to do time in prison and face those consequences. It's not for everyone.

But I was fascinated that people would commit these actions, knowing that their home and family life would be interrupted -- similar to those serving in our military who are deployed to fight in wars. Like members of the military, these people were trying to make the country and our world a better place, but using far different mechanisms.

When I wrote to people who were incarcerated for nonviolently entering a military base, they would tell me about their convictions, their loneliness, and how they were passing the time. After a while, I started to pursue a more formalized collection of letters from resisters. I recently donated this collection of letters to the Swarthmore College Peace Collection [1] at Swarthmore College outside of Philadelphia, where Wendy Chmielewski is the curator. If you are in that area, I recommend you check it out to read the words of people who made a decision and faced the consequences from society.

There has been much written about the role of nonviolent resisters serving prison time in the landscape of American culture, but most of it is from the Vietnam War era. I think the current generation is still being defined. The people who risk their livelihoods and face penalties of time in jail and prison are teachers, social workers, religious workers, grandparents, daughters and everything in between. Some are veterans who served in the military. Some are Christians from one of the historic peace churches, and others are Roman Catholics. Some aren't a part of any organized religion. All seek to raise awareness and witness to the destruction of lives and livelihoods that the U.S. military brings on other nations of people, whether intended or not.

I am looking for (and welcome comments on) whether this work is effective. It's not for everyone, including myself, but I do think it's effective. I don't think there would be any legislation in Congress that gains more votes each year in an attempt to close the school down. People who serve prison time raise a great deal of consciousness within their family, friends and peer groups about the issue. And it holds up one of this country's greatest tenets, the First Amendment -- freedom of speech, expression and religion. In the end, it's something that the U.S. military supports through its own mechanisms.

I can't watch a basketball game on TV without seeing military advertisements for joining the Marines or setting up a military retirement account. All people who have served their country are important. But I also encourage all of us to get to know nonviolent resisters and what they contribute to what our country holds dear. I think the best way to do this is to learn from the resisters themselves.

More information on letter-writing can be found on the SOA website [2].

[Mike Sweitzer-Beckman helped launch the blog youngadultcatholics-blog.com/ [3] in 2008. He also blogs at sweitman-solutions.com/ [4] about technology.]

**Editor's note:** We can send you an email alert every time a Young Voices column is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **Email alert sign-up** [5]. If you already receive email alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add Young Voices to your list.

---

**Source URL (retrieved on *2016-05-29 02:12*):** http://ncronline.org/blogs/young-voices/place-nonviolent-civil-disobedience-todays-culture

**Links:**
[1] http://www.swarthmore.edu/library/peace/
[2] http://ncronline.org/soaw.org/about-us/pocs/150-articles/3578-tips-for-writing-to-prisoners
[3] http://www.youngadultcatholics-blog.com/
[4] http://sweitman-solutions.com/
[5] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup