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Peace activist sentenced to one year in jail for disorderly conduct, order violation

Patrick O'Neill | Jul. 16, 2014

Mary Anne Grady Flores' voicemail gives callers an unusual instruction: "Hi, this is Mary Anne Grady Flores. Please don't leave a message as I will be away from July 10 for an unknown period of time."

The reason for this Catholic grandmother's unusual message: On July 10, Grady Flores was sentenced to the maximum of one year in jail for disorderly conduct and violating a court order stemming from a February 2013 anti-drone protest at Hancock Field Air National Guard Base. The base, near Syracuse, N.Y., is a training center for drone pilots, technicians and maintenance workers, as well as other drone activities.

Grady Flores, 57, did not plan on being arrested that Ash Wednesday, Feb. 13, 2013. She was under a court order to stay off base property, so she stood on a nearby roadway, taking pictures of the protest, which included about 20 activists. Police on the scene said she entered base property, so they arrested her and charged her with disorderly conduct for blocking a roadway. She was also charged with violating an order of protection that bars protesters from going near Col. Earl Evans, a base commander.

Nine people, including Grady Flores and her sister Ellen, were arrested at the protest. Three have since had their charges dropped on a technicality and five, including Ellen Grady, were acquitted in October [1].

"I'm feeling fine inside of me," Grady Flores told *NCR* the night before her sentencing. "I am going to be fine in jail. I'm going to find wonderful community in there, people of faith. I'm going to be with the poor, and that's where Christ asks us to be, and so with 2 million people that are in prison in the United States, and with that number growing, I will be in solidarity with them."

Grady Flores said she has received a "tremendous outpouring of support" from her friends and family as she was preparing for jail. Friends and neighbors stopped by her house to wish her goodwill.

"This is going to be a really good retreat for me," Grady Flores said.

In February, Grady Flores served seven days in jail for a previous arrest at the base.

In a similar case, John "Jack" Gilroy, 78, of Binghamton, N.Y., was convicted Tuesday in the same DeWitt court of trespassing and "obstruction of governmental administration" for his role in an April 28, 2013, protest at the base. The sentence for the latter charge could be up to one year in jail and a fine of $1,000. He is scheduled to be sentenced Oct. 1.

Flores is challenging the protection order she was convicted of violating, which the DeWitt Town Court issued on behalf of Evans, the base colonel. "Such [protection] orders had been established to prevent domestic violence and victim abuse, but are now being used to quell dissent," said a statement released by Grady Flores' support committee.

"We will continue challenging such orders for their blatant abuse of the First Amendment, for shutting down free speech and citizens' right to protest government misdeeds, and for their inappropriate application of New York State law," the statement said.

Onondaga County, N.Y., Acting Supreme Court Judge John Brunetti has ruled that the protection order was invalid because it's vague. The prosecution is appealing that decision.

[Patrick O'Neill, a freelance writer from Garner, N.C., is a longtime contributor to *NCR*.]

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