

Nuclear threat outweighs risk of arrest for local women

By Teresa A. Parsons

Christine Garrison and Carol Crossed traveled to the Nevada desert earlier this month with the express purpose of being arrested, because they believed they owed it to their children.

Garrison has two daughters, aged nine and 18. Crossed is the mother of six children whose ages range from 11 to 21. Both women struggled with their decision to court arrest and the possibility of as much as six months in jail on the far side of the United States. But the difficulty of that decision was far outweighed by the day-to-day threat of nuclear war.

"I have a nine-year-old daughter who lives in fear of the bomb," Garrison said. "I feel that the very least I can do for her — for both my children — is to stand up strongly and say, 'This has got to stop!'"

Crossed and Garrison were arrested separately on August 6 and again on August 9 during demonstrations at the Nevada Test Site in Mercury, Nev. The demonstrations were sponsored by the Nevada Desert Experience, a Las Vegas-based organization that opposes nuclear weapons testing. The early-August protests marked the 42nd anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, during World War II.

Crossed represented a local organization known as Common Ground (formerly Pro-Lifers for Survival), which promotes a consistent approach to the entire range of life issues. "I believe life is being looked upon as expendable by the millions, whether the means is nuclear war, abortion or war in Central America," she said. "There need to be people who believe in the connection of issues like this."

Garrison represented Corpus Christi Parish, which has recently begun sending one or more parishioners to the Nevada anti-nuclear protests on a regular basis. Preceding Garrison was Corpus Christi parishioner Chava Strong, who participated in the Pentecost demonstration at which two U.S. bishops were arrested along with 98 other demonstrators.

Garrison's activism stems not only from her concern for her family, but also from her work as director of Dimitri House, a Corpus Christi-based outreach to homeless people. "I see the numbers of people in need of shelter and meals, and then I think of the millions of dollars being poured into destruction," she said. "We need to turn those resources around to finance life instead of death."

Also participating in the demonstrations were two other Rochester women, Maureen Milligan and Lisa Kowalewski, as well as Jann K. Armantrout of Honeoye Falls. The Nevada protest drew participants from all over the United States. Crossed described the majority as middle-aged and middle-class, varying in denomination from Quakers to Catholics, Buddhists to Presbyterians. Among the demonstrators were Los Angeles city council representatives, teachers, artists and homemakers. Surprisingly, however, relatively few of the protesters were students.

The August 6 demonstration began with a roadside prayer vigil alongside the entrance to the Nevada Test Site — more than 1,300 square miles of desert located 65 miles north of Las Vegas. Approximately once every three weeks at the site, the U.S. and British governments are believed to explode devices that are a dozen times more powerful than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

As employees of the test site began arriving for work August 6, more than 200 demon-

strators staged a memorial service for victims of the atomic bombings in Japan. Nearly half of the demonstrators then engaged in civil disobedience, either by stepping across the boundaries of the test site, or by blocking the road leading up to the gate.

Both Crossed and Garrison chose the latter action. "Some of us felt it was important to do something more than symbolic," Crossed said.

"At least for a minute or two, traffic could not pass" through to the gate, Garrison added.

As sheriff's deputies handcuffed the demonstrators, many resisted by going limp. Rather than dragging the bodies onto waiting buses, Garrison said, the deputies stood back for nearly 20 minutes in the 100-degree heat, allowing those under arrest to lie on the blistering asphalt, in hopes that the demonstrators would voluntarily get up.

"It was very, very powerful to see the effect that had on the deputies," Garrison said. "It forced them to grapple with what was really going on. They began to have serious concerns for people's health, which meant they had to struggle between their official role and feelings of compassion."

At last, three deputies brought cups of water to the demonstrators, who then got up and climbed aboard the buses. One deputy told Crossed: "You don't look like the type to be arrested."

"I have six children," she replied. "I have four," the deputy responded. "Won't you join me then?" she asked. The deputy didn't answer.

With an hour, all 103 people who had been arrested were processed at a nearby trailer and released.

During both demonstrations, those who opposed nuclear-weapons testing faced counter-protests from a group known as Americans for Nuclear Testing. Las Vegas news reports identified the group as being composed mostly of test-site employees and union leaders.

As a group, the pro-testing people were often bitter, Crossed said. She heard them shout: "Nuke 'em. Radiate 'em." Others passed out rubber gloves to the deputies, warning that the demonstrators might have AIDS.

On the other hand, some individuals from both groups chatted cordially with one another. Two women — one for and one against testing — even had a photograph taken together and exchanged addresses.

The latter type of communication is the goal of the test-site demonstrations, according to Michael Affleck, a Rochesterian who helped found the Nevada Desert Experience.

"We believe that non-violence is a (means of solving problems) that has to change our own hearts as well as those to whom our actions are directed," he explained. "We know that the violence we oppose at the test site exists in our own hearts as well . . . When we go into the desert, we stand on the same moral ground as our opponents, not in a position of righteousness. We're there to make friends with them."

Affleck, who is also the director of St. Joseph's House of Hospitality in Rochester, took part in his first desert protest and prayer vigil during Lent, 1982. Members of West-coast Franciscan communities were looking for a way to collectively celebrate the end of a year of prayer honoring the 800th anniversary of the birth of St. Francis of Assisi.

Affleck suggested spending 40 days and

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For their own sakes and for their children, Rochester residents Christine Garrison (left) and Carol Crossed were arrested earlier this month after engaging in civil disobedience during a demonstration at the Nevada Test Site in Mercury, Nev. Along with other several hundred other demonstrators, Garrison and Crossed took part in the Nevada Desert Experience, which protested the testing of nuclear weapons.

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