

Anti-War Grannies Arrested Trying to Enlist

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As part of actions across the United States to mark the fifth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, 10 “Grandmothers for Peace”, ranging in age from 57 to 80, were arrested Monday while trying to enlist in the United States Army. Acts of civil disobedience are planned this week in at least 17 other U.S. cities.

As exclusively observed by IPS, the Grandmothers for Peace entered the Army Recruiting Station at the Midtown Place Shopping Centre in Atlanta, Georgia at around 9:30 am. The women broke up into three groups, each approaching a different recruiter’s desk to engage them in questions.

“When do you get the bonuses? Do you get them right away?” a Grandmother asked.

“You guys are on a fishing expedition to catch people in lies,” declared one recruiter, who said her name was “Ms. Reed”.

“What we’re doing is, we’re very much against the Iraq war. We’d like for you to let us enlist,” said Bobbie Paul, 58, executive director of Atlanta Women’s Action for New Directions.

“We have to make sure people are physically pre-screened,” said a recruiter named Kevin Wells.

“Could we enlist today? So the youth don’t have to go? Can you give us a list of jobs?” Paul persisted.

“There are regulations we have to follow, set by the government, as far as entry and recruiting,” Wells responded.

“Would you take me? I’m 80,” said Doris Benit of Kennesaw, Georgia.

“Me personally? Absolutely! But as far as the Army, there is a process,” Wells answered.

“What’s the first step?” Benit asked.

“The first step is to have a seat,” Wells said. Then, the 10 grandmothers all took seats around his desk.

Meanwhile, dozens of activists were beating drums and chanting outside under a banner that read, “Take Us, Not Our Grandchildren!”

“We need an application,” said Gloria Tatum, 65, of the Georgia Peace and Justice Coalition,

Atlanta.

"I believe in action. You're doing what you can. I'm doing what I can. We're in the same direction. This country is the greatest in the world. There's many ways to do things. I'm very passionate about this country and worry where it's going. It needs you. It needs me. It needs that young man over there [IPS reporter]. It needs that kind of passion," Wells said.

Then, "I want everybody outside!" Reed shouted, after calling for backup and talking with her supervisor.

Finally, the Atlanta Police Department showed up. "People have 10 seconds to get off the property because it's private property or else you'll be arrested immediately," one police officer said through a loudspeaker.

"We're grandmothers — it takes us 10 seconds just to get our bones coordinated," commented Rev. Sylvia Carroll of the First Iconium Baptist Church, who was one of the 16 "support grandmothers" who did not get arrested.

"I feel great. I think we made a statement this war needs to end now. [President George W. Bush and Congress] have broken international law... [and] trashed the Constitution," Tatum told IPS before getting arrested.

"The police officer told me, you should take care of yourself. I've lived a full life. I want these young men to be able to do the same. We have nothing against these young people. We don't want them to die," Benit said.

"I think it was a great success, in the sense we were able to stay in there as long as we were and having an exchange. We kept 'em occupied, to draw attention to ourselves. We refused to leave until they told us we were arrested," added Dot Shaw, 73, of Snellville, Georgia.

"Anyone in charge?" the police asked as the women stood downstairs chanting, waiting for a police van to take them away.

"We're not a battalion," Paul responded.

"We insist! We enlist! Grandmothers for Peace!" they chanted. "We protest! We're under arrest!"

"We're cold out here, so take us in," Benit told Officer "C. Mac." "What's jail like? Is it warm?"

"Okay, hello everyone... I'm against this war as much as you. However, we still have to conduct business as usual. We have to restore a level of normalcy. We have received complaints," Officer Mac told the Grandmothers.

Betsey Miklethun, 74, of Norcross, Georgia, read a letter she had written to her grandchildren before getting arrested.

"This week marks the fifth anniversary... I'm gonna cry because I love them so much... of the war and occupation of Iraq. Much could be said about this, from me to you. Today I plan to participate in a nonviolent act of civil disobedience. I've never done this before,"

Miklethun said. "Somebody's got to stand up and say, I care."

IPS asked an Army spokesperson why the Grandmothers for Peace were not allowed to enlist.

"They were turned away because they were disrupting business," said Tim Humphreys, public relations for the Atlanta Recruiting Battalion.

"Anyone who is serious about enlisting in the Army can go to Army.com to fill out the paperwork and can schedule an appointment. These ladies apparently were not interested in that," Humphreys said, adding the age limit is 42.

Susan Keith, a board member of Atlanta Progressive News, did bring an application with her to the Recruiting Centre.

"You're trying to ask a loaded question," Humphreys said. Humphreys did not return a phone call from IPS seeking additional comment.

The Atlanta Police Department confirmed the arrest of the 10 Grandmothers for Peace.

The women were charged with criminal trespassing, and taken to Fulton County Jail. They are expected to post bond by this evening. The crime, a misdemeanor, could carry a maximum of one year in jail, although a judge could use his or her discretion, Officer Eric Schwartz said.

"They didn't say anything about them being disruptive," Schwartz said. "The owner of the property has the right to tell them they do not want them there. We don't determine whether the reason the owner is asking them to leave is valid or not."

Others arrested were Ella Ruth Hunnicutt, 79, Roswell, Georgia; Minnie Ruffin, 66, Atlanta; Ann Mauney, 65, Atlanta; and Judy "Artemis" Conder, 60.

Grandmothers for Peace International was founded in 1981 when Barbara Wiender, the first Grandmother for Peace, was arrested protesting the presence of nuclear weapons near her home in Sacramento, California. Today, the group conducts a variety of protests and other actions, including civil disobedience, around issues of nuclear disarmament, peace, and justice. It has offices in the U.S., Germany, Romania, South Africa, and Britain.

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