

OBITUARIES

Leading figure in NZ anti-nuclear crusade

Fearing nuclear war would engulf the northern hemisphere, Canadian Larry Ross faced a difficult choice. Should he build a radiation-proof bunker under the back lawn, or should he move his family to the southernmost English-speaking country on Earth?

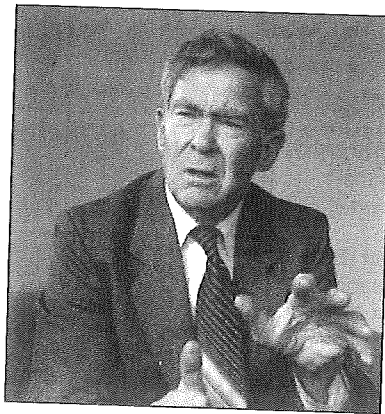
The costs were about the same. He chose the latter. The Montreal advertising executive shifted his family to Christchurch and settled there in 1962. He died three weeks ago in Christchurch. He was 84.

Ross was born in the United States but moved to Canada as a child. World War II was still raging when he left school and he considered joining the air force. He changed his mind on seeing photographs of the effects of the atomic-bomb blast over Hiroshima in 1945. He became a leading figure in New Zealand's anti-nuclear movement, although he was never a pacifist. He once said if New Zealand were ever invaded, he would take up arms to defend it.

Pictures of Hiroshima led Ross to join the Albert Schweitzer Peace Group and the Unitarian Church in Canada. Through these he became involved in lobbying for an end to the Cold War in the 1950s. Then came the Cuban missile crisis. The Doomsday clock seemed to be counting down. Ross packed up and headed south.

In Christchurch he found work in market research to support his family of six children. However, he gave this away when asked to work full-time with the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, campaigning against New Zealand involvement in the Vietnam War. This was unpaid and the Ross family lived on a legacy from his father.

After three years, Ross took another job, as a manager for a building society. When his children had left home, he returned to full-time anti-nuclear campaigning, in 1981. He



Larry Ross: Single-issue activist.

established the Nuclear Free Zone Committee that year. Revenue from books, posters, stickers and other protest merchandise that he developed helped sustain him.

Maintaining a fitness regime of daily swimming at QEII pool and walking on the beach near his New Brighton home kept him in good physical trim. He built up a formidable collection of books, journals and papers. They filled his house and garage to overflowing, but they also provided the background for him to argue his case against nuclear weapons to groups and towns throughout New Zealand and abroad.

His achievements included the successful promotion of the idea for towns and regions to declare themselves nuclear-free. He gave hundreds of addresses and did radio and TV interviews around the world.

Daughter Laurel says her father travelled widely "empowering people to start neighbourhood peace groups to lobby their local councils to declare a Nuclear Free Zone". Christchurch, Wellington, and Auckland city councils were among 86 local bodies that had passed the declaration by 1984, when the Labour Government was elected on this policy platform. Within three years, 72 per cent of New Zealanders lived in 105

Nuclear Free Zones and the policy was enshrined in legislation. Ross was awarded the Queen's Service Medal and the Peace City Award for his work.

Leading peace campaigner Kate Dewes says Ross differed from other activists in two main ways. Ever the "professional" man, he was always well dressed and groomed. He insisted on wearing a suit and tie. He wanted to break the common image of a "peacenik" and make it difficult for people to dismiss him as a crank.

He remained sharply focused on the nuclear threat to humanity, refusing to broaden his focus to other topical issues while his peers were protesting against apartheid, abuses of the Treaty of Waitangi and violence against women.

Some people in the peace movement found Ross overwhelming. He was a forceful character with strong self-belief. He was relentless and brash, in a North American way, Dewes says. He mellowed with age and became better able to work with others and empower them.

"He was energetic and dynamic. He did his research thoroughly and always had the facts at his fingertips. I honour his perseverance and commitment. I learned a lot from him. He had a huge impact on keeping New Zealand nuclear-free," Dewes says.

Ross was twice married. His health suffered in latter years and after a spell in hospital, he entered a rest home in 2007. He rebounded and regained much of his independence, helped by the loving care of partner Brenda Crocker. He kept a lively interest in current events, plants, photography, food and arts and crafts.

MIKE CREAM

■ Lawrence (Larry) Ross, born Yonkers (New York State), November 25, 1927; died Christchurch, April 18, 2012. Survived by partner Brenda Crocker and his extended family.