

Kathleen Gallagher interviewing Mary Baker on 23 Feb 2004 at her house in Burgess St Sumner on a Sony TCM 5000

**When did you first become aware that you were a peace person?**

I guess it was when I started working with CORSO back in the seventies and that was followed by working for Catholic Commission for Justice and Development with John Curnow. I guess those have been great influences in my life.

**What does peace mean for you?**

I'm aware that John Curnow had this badge and on it it said there'll be no peace without justice. So I suppose for me peace means working for justice and the final outcome of justice if ever attained is peace.

**Who have been some of the people you have worked with over the years?**

Robert Consedine, John Curnow, Jim Consedine, Marie Venning, Katie Dewes, the Quaker Peace Movement which I think is a particularly good movement. That's just some off hand, and the Catholic Peace Movement

**And what have they taught you or how have they been of inspiration to you?**

It comes, there are different parts of it I guess. The thing that hurts me the most is racism and initially I became involved with peace through the nuclear movement and Marie Venning in Christchurch was particularly involved in that when we went around parishes to make them nuclear free. I think the first big joy was having the Catholic cathedral made a Nuclear Free building. That would also be in the seventies (early 1980s) and Marie was very responsible for getting the Catholic Peace movement together. We had marches and colourful banners. So that was really inspirational and then of course there's also the part of peace which involves war and peace which is another aspect. I guess in my first involvement there was in 91 in trying to stop the war with Iraq and of course this last war with Iraq and the involvement particularly of America. And of course with nuclear ships we were all involved with that. I remember one fine day going out on a yacht and trying to stop this big American ship which I can't even remember the name of coming in.

**Was that the submarine USS Whipple?**

No it was a ship.

**What did you do in 1991? What sort of involvement did you have?**

Well that was mainly marches and getting involved with the groups which were involved then. Time plays havoc with the memory. And a special group was set up which everyone who wanted to get involved attended a meeting and that was when the war side of it and the American involvement in Middle East affairs. I started to learn a lot about that.

**When you first became involved what made you want to work for peace?**

That was in the seventies. Apartheid in South Africa was a huge issue, hunger, deprivation, the struggle for. – It's difficult now – there were so many things going on – but I suppose apartheid for me stands out for the seventies.

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**And you were working with John Curnow at the time?**

Yes and then of course as the seventies went by and the tour of eighty-one loomed I became involved with other groups as well.

**So the first group was CORSO and then HART?**

Yes and then in Christchurch we had Coalition against the Tour which I was chairperson. But that was not set up until probably 1980. I was involved with it when Trevor Richards was the national co-ordinator of HART in the 70s that's when I first became involved and that was through CORSO

**So did your involvement with CORSO go right through?**

I was working for CORSO. I started in 1973 and then my mother became ill and I stayed home to look after her and when I went back after that I actually worked for John Curnow.

**And what sort of things do you remember about working with John Curnow?**

He had a huge impact on many people's lives, not always pleasant, but I suppose learnt a huge amount from him. He was such a clever person with an absolutely brilliant mind and brilliant memory. He had a really big impact on my life and the Consedines I'd have to say. But then later on women came far more to the fore. Then Marie Venning and a lot of other women in the anti-apartheid movement and a lot of the younger women - Annie Bowden and Paddy Moore - they taught us a lot about gender issues.

**Does being a peace person make you more aware of cultural issues like justice gender environment?**

Definitely and I've realised the more I've gone on how linked they are. You only need to look at NZ at the moment where one racist speech can turn a whole population in favour of another political party. I think it is very critical and you won't, you'll never have peace without justice.

**You were also involved with the Ploughshares Movement?**

Right in the time I was involved which would have been mainly in the '80s. The Ploughshares Group I think was started after the '81 Tour to gather up people who'd been involved then. Our big thing was to go out every Friday to the airport to protest against the American involvement at Harewood and Deepfreeze, and that went on for a number of years.

**Who was involved with that with you?**

Jim Consedine He started it up. It was a group from the Catholic Justice Movement. Marie Venning, Pat Smaile, Ray Scott were involved in that; it was really only a small group of us that used to go out on a Friday. Eileen Shewan and several women from

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the Catholic Commission. I worked for them from probably 1974 until the end of 81 and then I had a period away and then I went back there in 1988 until 1991.

### **That's the Catholic Commission for Justice and Development**

It changed its named slightly over the time.

#### **What was it at first?**

I think the Catholic Commission for Justice and Development, and then it became the Catholic Commission for Justice Peace and Development, and then later Evangelisation - that's the big word that was the in National Commission's title. I was mainly in the Christchurch Office. I ran the office for the Christchurch office. John Curnow was upstairs and kept an eye on what I was doing.

#### **Did you do work outside of NZ, like the Philippines, or were you involved in any other places?**

Yes, well the Commission had a project committee, small funding. I mean the National Commission did the big funding but we had small funding. It mainly went to Christchurch groups but we supported the local Philippines Support Group and Women's Housing and many different groups around the city just by small two or three hundred grants at a time.

#### **What has motivated you to do the work that you have done?**

My father bought us up to be very aware of injustice and I remember very well the time that in 1951 Waterfront Strike and him standing up in front of the RSA and saying that you're locking out these guys who have only a few years ago returned from fighting overseas and what was the justice of that and he was a great Labour Party person and one of my treasures is a personal note from Norman Kirk when he died and I suppose I tried to follow. Well I didn't try initially but it just ... I followed in his footsteps and then I guess the big thing for me was the apartheid issue and now I find racism in Aotearoa is huge and of course on a global issue it's a whole American attacks for oil and all the injustice in the Middle East and round the world. I haven't got too much into globalisation because I'm retired and I don't go to meetings or but I still write the odd letter to the paper and I meet with my friends and we do a lot of talking about it but we all feel we've done our time and it's young peoples time who are handling it very well. I must say I did go to two big marches last year against the war in Iraq, more than two.

#### **And what was your father's name?**

His name was Gason, Alfred Gason. He had his eighteenth birthday on Gallipoli. He went to war at seventeen as they did those days and lied about their ages because he came from a very poor family and I think they thought there was security in the job and had no idea what it would be like when they went away.

#### **So what effect did that have on him - did he become a Pacifist as a result?**

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Well he was wounded just in the leg which made him limp for the rest of his life but also he had emphysema but I felt that the gases that he encountered probably helped with that, but also they were encouraged to take up smoking for their nerves and smoking has a huge impact on people's lives.

**But this belief that he had with the waterside workers union and that note from Norman Kirk that inspired you were there any other things that inspired you?**

Seeing that film that was brought here by the World Council of Churches called the Last Grave at Dimbasa

**I haven't seen that**

And I remember with a lot of other people sitting there crying and seeing guys with tears running down their eyes and that was a great inspiration.

**What was it about?**

It was just about life for black people in South Africa.

**That was in the early seventies?**

We saw that in the mid to perhaps about 1978 or something. And also there were a lot of other films around at the time which John Curnow was bringing back from meetings overseas. You know that were very educational and showed us what was happening in many countries. You know the whole multinational thing was happening in a big way then so it was hugely educational time for me.

**And during the Springbok tour I remember you leading some of the marches with a megaphone and various things like that I remember you standing out very strongly during the whole of the tour probably with Annie Bowden. What are some of the highlights that you remember from the tour?**

Well I guess the first highlight was that during we were having a big lead up and I went away from NZ for ten days to meet family in America and left here thinking - no I don't think it will happen because the majority of the population had voted against the tour, so I thought no, it is going to be cancelled and I had this ten days in USA and then got on the plane in Los Angeles and my daughter says to me 'that looks like the Springboks on the plane' and that was huge.

**They were on the plane with you 'o my God Father'**

So I jumped on the plane and went straight up and told them that they weren't wanted and started quoting a few slogans around at the time and then one of the plane staff came up to me and told me I'd be offloaded if I didn't sit down and behave. So, I waited till we got to Hawaii and then attacked the only black person in the team. I think his name was Chester Williams, and asked him why he was selling out and once again got warned I'd be left in Hawaii and then got on the plane and I thought I needed to do something a bit more strategic. So, I waited until everyone was having breakfast not far out of NZ and I'd made myself on the "strawberry so-called packet"

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a little banner with “shame” on it, and gone over and over it with a red biro and marched up and down the plane when everyone was at breakfast and the trays were down and they couldn’t get up and the Springboks were absolutely startled. The abuse came from the other NZers on the plane.

**But not from the Springboks because they didn’t expect it?**

No, they were just, you know, they didn’t say a word I don’t think.

**So you were the very first demonstration?**

I was the first demonstration yeah but then when I got back they were having a Day of Shame and I got quite horrified because Annie Bowden was leading that one and they were trying to knock down the Lancaster Park fence and I remember at that stage I hadn’t been involved in anything like that and I was quite shocked about it.

**Where it could go?**

About where it could go and you know just the knocking down of property was entirely new for me. Then it became later on not so bad just knocking down a fence but I know that first day - “shock, horror”.

**After that were there any things - highlights that come to your mind?**

Well I think you know we marched every Wednesday and Saturday every time there was a game, and I think then a Catholic Group under Jim Consedine took over the rugby rooms and that was an entirely different and very peaceful kind of action and it was good to know there were other groups out there besides the official groups working, and from then on there was just one action after another. As our group was in the coalition, we took over National Party headquarters at one stage so it was just one and then the first big mass arrest in Hereford Street happened quite by accident. We were sort of winding through that area of Hereford and Cashel St and suddenly saw ourselves right across that whole street and thought it would be a great place to sit down and so that was that the first mass arrest I think. There were about 179 arrested.

**More people were arrested in Christchurch than anywhere in NZ?**

Yes, they used to laugh at us and say that is what we do here - we sit down and get arrested

**But it sort of worked**

It worked and I remember this young policeman arresting me. He was actually shaking like a leaf but he put his thumbs behind my ears and it sort of immobilizes you, but certainly all the police weren’t like that.

**And were you in the cells overnight or were you just there for a few hours?**

I think just a few hours I think I was arrested about eight times in all and during that time, as I say, I learned a lot about the Women’s Movement.

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**Because we did reclaim the night not long after?**

Yes and it was just these young ones telling the older ones this is what we do.

**Because I was arrested with Garry Moore out at New Brighton on that turnaround and he was lying down on the street. Now, what are some other examples of successful campaigns you have been involved in?**

I suppose some successful ones the most obviously successful were the HART and anti apartheid campaign and the Coalition set up which I think did have an effect the whole rugby thing being so huge in NZ and in South Africa. I think it happened in a reasonably significant way to bring so-called democracy to South Africa and the Peace Movement I think in banning nuclear ships from NZ was highly successful and is still operating today.

**That's right there's nuclear free NZ**

Yes

**And the nuclear free in all the churches?**

Yes and there has never been any attempt to try and build a nuclear power station because of the whole feeling in the country, and I don't think that's changed significantly.

**67% I think it's really high**

Yes, they are most obviously successful in a small way I suppose some of the projects that we were involved with in the Catholic Commission like the Women's Housing. They set up Housing Trust for Women and the Philippines Support Group just helping them financially to send out their educational material and several groups like that which in a small way helping locally.

**There's great things aren't there, and small things but they...**

They're small things but they just help the groups achieve their aims but also it might be just a little project but it might benefit a lot of people over a long period of time.

**Do you think that the same issues exist now as existed then or do you think it's changed from how it was in the 70s and 80s?**

Well there are bigger issues now like the whole globalisation and the whole translational corporation and what it will do for the poor and I think that racism still exists wherever and just at this particular moment NZ is very polarised. So yes, the issues will always be there. The whole Middle East situation is huge and so, no, I think there are different issues but they're very big and the future doesn't look all that bright.

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**And how did your family, friends, neighbours or workmates react to your choice to campaign and work for peace?**

They were really supportive. My husband was really supportive - he used to worry that something would happen to me. Some were more involved than others but not one of my family, except my brother - I used to have huge arguments with him, but most of my friends, but at that stage my friends were all doing the work I was doing, or most of them were and the ones who weren't - older friends and that - who didn't approve didn't tell me - they would just quietly disapprove.

**And what about your children?**

They were really supportive. Most of them were in marches. I had a lot of support from my family - some were quite fearful. My daughter who was on the plane coming back from South Africa - she was just married at the time and her husband was with her - he disapproved at what just happened, at what I was doing - she was really upset.

**What are some other things like that you have done - any other things?**

I had a friend Ann Edmondson in the anti-apartheid movement in the coalition and we had never done any pasting, everyone else did all the pasting, so anyway we decided we would be in on that and we had a lot of fun a couple of nights going around pasting up. I had a lot of trouble with John Curnow in the end. He felt my office had been taken over by the young ones in the coalition but having said that a few years later he was very pleased to get out and say. "Well our office was actually the office where most was happening".

**So then he remembered what you had done?**

Yes, when it seemed alright. It was quite alright to be saying that but initially he thought I was putting too much of my time and the office time into the apartheid movement.

**And you mentioned the Consedines - Bob and Jim?**

Bob initially - Robert by name now, taught me a lot in CORSO and I was a friend of Jimmy's for years and he was always very supportive of any movement for justice. One of the things I suppose from Jim, that in later times has been quite helpful to me was the Funeral Choice. Not that I was involved in that but because of that I was able to do the whole of my husband's funeral just with family, without any help.

**Did you make the coffin?**

No, we didn't make the coffin but we did the whole service and

**What has sustained you through all the years in your struggle for peace and justice?**

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I suppose my involvement with the Catholic Church, but in later times I became very disillusioned with the Catholic Church so I subsequently left the Church about eight years ago so I guess I'm really sustained by my beliefs.

**And would you say your belief your faith...**

Yeah I have my own spirituality and I guess that when you've been really involved in issues you don't just turn off very easily even though I decided a while ago Well I had done my activist work. As a whole I'm very strong in what I believe in and I still try to learn as much as I can through articles, documentaries, national radio I think is a huge ...

**And what lessons have you learned, or is lessons not a good word? What things are there - any things you've learned now that you didn't at the beginning?**

I've always been very aware that organisations like CAFCA that they never ever put me wrong that their material was always good that's what I found with most of the groups I've been in, that while a lot of people who don't get involved might really argue against you you can put up facts and figures that come from these groups we've worked with and CAFCA was definitely one of the ones we had small projects with – that their material was always good and researched and I guess I've learned the organisations I trust and that you can rely on to give you good information.

**So you know where to go....**

And I think it's in a world where now money is so important, and I know even with my own family it's such a huge thing, not just to have possessions but give your kids a good education and give them everything that I am sustained by the knowledge that the whole thing about peace and justice will sustain me through life. An absolutely critical part of living ...

**And can I just ask you some sort of background material like where you were born?**

My family lived at Hawarden and I was actually born at Waikari hospital - all my siblings were. Six children - three boys and three girls. I come in the middle. I have an older brother and sister. My older brother died in his fifties from lung cancer and another brother died in his early sixties.

**When did you shift to Christchurch?**

My father did not want us to be - he had to work for farmers and work hard all his life and work at, I remember him biking a way up in the country in huge nor'westers, but he didn't want us to. He wanted us to be able to do more than that, so we shifted to Rangiora for High School years and then when I was married I shifted as far away as Kaiapoi and then when our family started getting ready for High School there was no High School in Kaiapoi at the time so we shifted to Christchurch in 1970 so I slowly worked my way to Christchurch from the country.

**How many children do you have?**



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I have eight - six girls and two boys. Six of them live in New Zealand and two in Australia. Between them I have twenty-one grandchildren.

**And now you live here out at Sumner by the beach?**

We shifted here. Brian's health had started to deteriorate then. We've been here coming up six and a half years and it was because of Erin. She helped us into this house and it's a lovely lifestyle.

**You're near the beach?**

And the hills. I love the hills for tramping. Only drawback is you spend more on petrol getting to your activities. I go to town very seldom but I do go to dancing and that's mainly at over Brighton way I go.

**Are there any special people that we haven't mentioned that you remember working with? I remember you mentioned Ann Edmondson - any other people we haven't mentioned just now?**

Colleen Costello. Colleen is a marvellous woman even up till now, now she is still giving huge amounts of her time to women especially. She was involved with CORSO and Trade Aid for probably about twenty-five years and she's the same age as me but she doesn't retire and she's now working for Women's Refuge and can be called out any time of night to go and pick up women in violent situations.

**Is she living in Christchurch now because she was in North Canterbury?**

Yes, so Colleen actually of all the women I know around my age is the most active and does an absolutely huge, huge amount.

**So how old is Colleen now?**

Colleen's seventy-three, she doesn't keep particularly good health either.

**She does a lot of work now in women's area but she's worked in justice and peace and anti-apartheid she's worked right across the board**

She's felt the oppression of women a lot I think. As a young woman she went to live on a farm, she had been a nurse and I think she worked her butt off, she had eight children plus several miscarriages, ill health and was still doing all the work on the farm like cooking for shearers in those days which I don't think they have to do now. They have their own cooks and helping with everything but Colleen's really yearned to further her education and because she's a real intellectual and she came to Christchurch in her fifties I guess, and did a degree and has really committed herself and all her free time, she does a lot of work with her family and grandchildren but she really works for the betterment of women.

**Are then any other people like that that we haven't mentioned?**

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Well Eileen Shewan. Eileen's remarkable - great nature, Pat Smale, Marie Venning, Mary Riley was very involved.

**And these women mostly became involved in the late seventies early eighties and they've just continued....**

I think the catalyst was the Tour to bring everyone together from lots of different places and people have remained good friends. I think three years ago we had the twentieth anniversary of the tour whilst a lot of people had been in the peace movement before me I think in particularly the Quakers. The great umbrella then became the anti-apartheid movement.

**Because the Quakers - we used their meeting rooms at the beginning**

Yes, I remember then of course at the end of eighty-one the young Maori activists who'd worked really hard during the tour getting up at a HART meeting and challenging us and saying, right, you were really really concerned about racism happening ten thousand miles away, isn't it about time you looked in your own back yard, and that also brought a lot of people together to work for that and a lot of the Treaty issues came to light then and the education on the Treaty which is still going on now.

**So that's like Bob Consedine and Trish and Sue McNabb?**

But there's a lot of people beside. They're doing it as a business the whole thing was set up as a group just to educate and that included people like Kath Rushton, Claire Pearson, Jim McAloon and Jenny Dawson - they set up the actual the original Treaty education but they all did it then on a voluntary basis.

**And what about people like Kate Dewes and Elsie Locke?**

O well Kate Dewes and Elsie Locke are really amazing. The way Katie has absolutely gone on and on. A lot of people feel the issues but they don't go on working for them like me, I guess, but there are people like Colleen and Katie and Elsie Locke who just keep on keeping on.

**I suppose Pauline O'Reagan?**

Yeah Pauline she's quite ill now isn't she, writing her books, has always been an amazing wonderful person. Pauline and even those in their seventies when they decided to get out and work in the community, that was a whole struggle for them because they had to take the wrath of a whole lot of people in their communities and say, that's not where we want to be, we don't want to be teaching in schools, we want to go and do the work in the communities, and there was a huge uproar over that at the time among many Catholics about these good teachers leaving the schools and who's going to replace them.

**And is there any other thing that you'd like to say to young people nowadays who are working in this area that you've spent thirty years working in the areas of peace and justice and anti-racism?**

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Well I think it's harder because we had a lot of people coming through the universities at that time, but now the way the universities work there's less time for them to become involved and life is hugely busy for families and when my children were small for instance they just biked off to school, there was no having to be there and pick them up and take them - they could be very independent...

I just think don't be disheartened and every action does bear fruit somewhere and it's still important to work for peace through justice and justice through peace and it will be a sad day when there aren't any young people out there and I was heartened last year going to the marches against the Iraq War to see so many young people and being very ably lead by young people very articulate young people, getting up there in front and that's very heartening for the older ones.

**Thank you very much Mary for sharing and remembering.**

**Mary, I'd just like to ask you some questions about peace and justice at a very grassroots level. What you do, what work did you do at your local level in the area of peace, or how did you work for peace?**

Well I suppose it started we had shifted from Gloucester St right in the city to Shirley and I had by then given up any paid work or even office work. A lot of my work with the Catholic Commission had been on a volunteer basis but I was living in the edge of one of the poorest areas of Christchurch, Emmet St in Shirley, and through that became aware the lives of many of the young women around there, solo mothers, single mothers with families, was really really hard and so with Mary Riley at that time we started visiting these people and the names kept coming from St Vincent De Paul and friends who would put us on to them and I became really aware of the lives of those people and how hard they were and how they were struggling with children and with finance and we started doing and taking them all sorts of things, food parcels and getting shoes for their children, providing some support and friendship. I remember once in a particularly deprived household a young woman was to have her sixteenth birthday and this place was really really dirty and dogs had lived inside and a group of us went and got the house ready for this sixteenth birthday party and it was a pretty big task. We were confronted with some very sad situations at times. I've told Kathleen that a lot of these women through loneliness would make contact with guys who were not good for them and the children became abused and I remember one baby landing up in hospital and had permanent brain damage you know and some of the people were not very aware of their rights or how would I describe people who perhaps had lower IQs and not very much education were particularly vulnerable and perhaps for three or four years we've built up between us a group of over thirty women who we visited on a regular basis and just tried to do what we could for.

**And you'd take them like food parcels?**

Yes, and we'd try to tell them what rights they had and what they could get through social welfare but yes we got our food parcels mainly from St Vincent de Paul who we worked in very well with and who were really good and

**And this was yourself and Mary Riley and ..**

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And later Colleen Costello joined us too and Colleen also became very involved in the Drapes for Houses Trust. I can't think of their official name which was started by Dell Small to supply good drapes to save on electricity costs and they worked in with South Power but Colleen did that for a long time.

**And you became involved with that when you finished with CCEJD**

Yes in fact the bishop closed us down actually. Bishop Meeking closed us down but we all, we were looking still for things to do.

**And you were still going out to the airport at that time?**

Yes I think so I'm a bit lost for the time yes but probably we were because that's ten years ago. Yes it would have been. Yes that was on a Friday. When I go down I often take a trip down Emmet St wondering if the same people are in the same houses and I have seen one or two of them but not too many over the years. When I shifted to here, Mary Riley had shifted to Diamond Harbour and it had started to wind down before that but for two or three years it was very full on.

**And you kept a diary of that time?**

I remember my poor husband the things I put on to him. I remember at one stage I was looking after somebody's children throughout the day and there were a couple of wild little boys there at one stage who made my husband tear his hair out.

**Well thank you very much Mary.**

**End of Interview**