

People for Peace

Dr. Kiki Anastasakos, Professor of Political Science

Looking at the serious problems confronting humanity, people often ask “How can things get better?” This page is dedicated to individuals who didn’t wait for others to act but instead they became engaged in their communities and often founded or joined grassroots groups to work passionately on issues that mattered to them – peace, social justice, human rights, the environment, and many others. They became involved, often without pay or special training. These are our neighbors in the Lehigh Valley, local heroes in our midst who inspire us to act.

[LEPOCO](#)



One of the oldest groups in the Lehigh Valley and the entire nation working tirelessly for peace and social justice is LEPOCO, or Lehigh-Pocono Committee of Concern. LEPOCO works on a variety of social and political issues including anti-war issues, foreign policy, environmental issues, and many others. The advocacy of the organization is achieved through a newsletter, peace camps, outreach and direct action, education, networking, and several other forms of public discourse.

Founded during the turbulent 1960s at the height of the Vietnam War, LEPOCO will celebrate 50 years of work for peace and social justice in 2015. While most of the anti-war groups of the 1960s have long disbanded, LEPOCO has remained active since then, and some of its founding members are still deeply involved in its activities. Although over the years the issues have changed, their commitment to pacifism and social justice has remained strong as has their presence in our communities.

LEPOCO came into being on December 19, 1965 in the midst of a considerable amount of anti-war activity around Lehigh Valley. A month earlier, many individuals from the area had participated in a bus trip to the March in Washington, D.C. to protest the war. On December 19, a group of 35 concerned citizens from the Lehigh Valley and the Poconos met at Kirkridge Retreat and Study Center on Blue Mountain, 5 miles north of Bangor on Rt. 191. They were responding to an invitation letter signed by the founder and director of Kirkridge, Rev. Dr. John Oliver Nelson, an ordained Presbyterian minister and former professor of Christian vocation at Yale Divinity School.



Rev. Dr. John Oliver Nelson (L), Howard Gallup (C) and Mary Cohen (R),
early LEPOCO members. *Source: LEPOCO archives*

At that meeting, the group decided to call itself “Committee of Concern for Vietnam” and one of its first actions was to draft a letter to President Lyndon B. Johnson, with copies sent to all Congressional representatives from Pennsylvania, and the local papers.

The letter reflected their strong anti-war sentiment and desire for a peaceful solution to the conflict: *“Dear Mr. President: We the undersigned speak.....out of deep concern for the suffering in Vietnam. We believe that the Government of the United States has the power and is in a position to stop the catastrophic war. We feel that the war in Vietnam is a great moral and practical error, and that needless loss of American and Vietnamese lives is appalling. We feel we cannot convince a continent of our ideals by using death and destruction as persuaders....Therefore, we call for immediate cessation of bombing....in order to provide the UN with the time and climate to arrange a permanent cease-fire and to negotiate for a permanent settlement....”* (Lepoco archives)

Thus the voice of LEPOCO began to echo locally and nationally resounding a message of non-violence, social justice, and community engagement. Before the end of 1965, the group had held its first protests and small vigils grew into a weekly event with a disciplined, non-violent presence in Easton's Center Square. By February 1966 they had drafted a statement of purpose and platform and elected Peter Cohen as the first chairman. The group supported draft resisters, brought speakers to the Lehigh Valley and joined anti-war protests locally and nationally. They lobbied their elected representatives and even ran peace candidates for a variety of state and Congressional offices. LEPOCO members used not only direct action but also believed strongly in the electoral process -- in 1966 they ran a peace candidate for Congress and in 1968 they sent delegates to both the Republican and Democratic national conventions.



December 23, 1965: Alvin Hill leads LEPOCO's inaugural demonstration against the War in Vietnam in Allentown, PA. *Source: Lepoco archives*

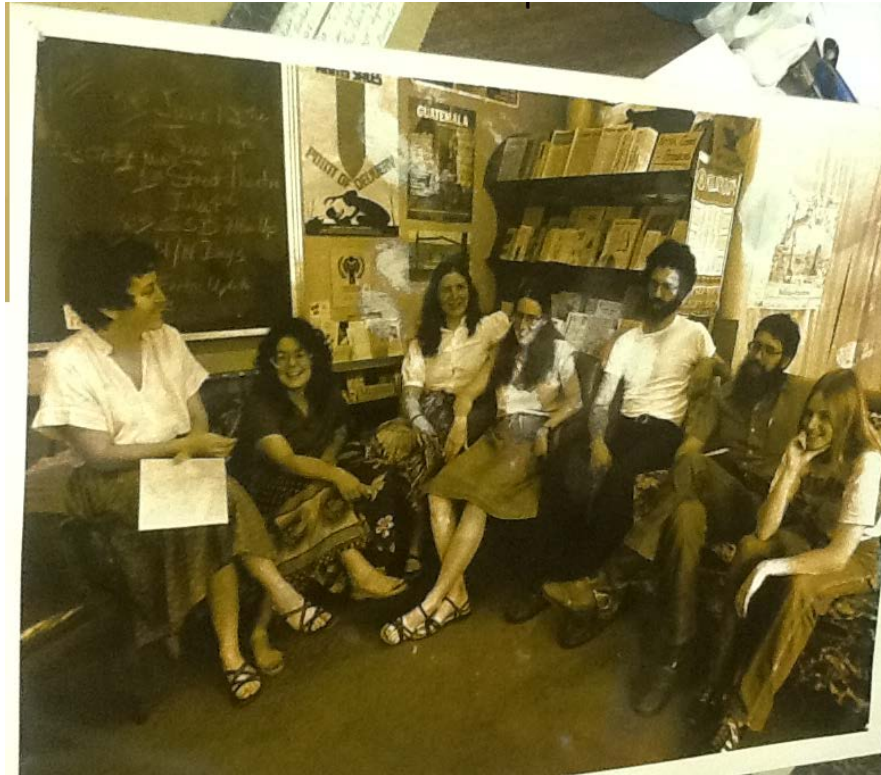
LEPOCO's first office was opened in 1971 and Anna Hunt was hired as its first coordinator. In 1973, Mrs. Hunt joined the American delegation to the Paris Peace Conference to discuss the end of the Vietnam War. The offices of LEPOCO provided a home to other local groups such as Veterans for Peace, Veterans against the War, a

Women's Liberation group, and the United Farm Workers Union. The group collaborated with several student groups protesting the Vietnam War in area colleges and universities and played a central role in anti-war efforts around the Lehigh Valley.



May 1970: Bethlehem City Council calls for an end to the Vietnam War. *Source: Lepoco archives*

During the Cold War years, LEPOCO members organized and advocated for nuclear disarmament and an end to “extravagant and deadly weapons systems, helped catalyze the nuclear disarmament debate locally, lobbied our representatives, and bussed hundreds of people to the U.N. Special Sessions on Disarmament.” (*Lepoco archives*).



June 14, 1982: Nancy Tate (L) and other LEPOCO members meet during U.N.'s Special Session II on Disarmament (SSD II) Source: *Lepoco archives*

Locally, they raised a strong voice of concern to the dangers of nuclear power as the community and the nation were jolted by the accident at Three Mile Island. Their commemorative events around August 6-9 have continued every year without fail since 1976 with a new generation of anti-nuclear activists joining the group.



August 2014: Members of LEPOCO participating in "A Peaceful World Is Possible: A Program of Remembrance, Reflection & Hope 69 Years after the First Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki." (Source: *Lepoco archives*)

As women's rights became a powerful issue around the country, LEPOCO convened a conference on feminism and militarism and many female members emerged as leaders in the group and they remain in leadership positions to this day. During the 1980s, as violence escalated in South America, LEPOCO held local events and protests "in solidarity with the struggles of the people in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Panama. " (*Lepoco archives*)

Today, LEPOCO is as vibrant as ever with a membership of nearly 1,000. Their office in 313 West Fourth St., in Bethlehem is bustling with activities and their phone rings constantly reflecting the energy still permeating the group. In recent years, they have been involved in opposing the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria and work with the same passion as 50 years ago to address issues threatening world peace and our planet. In addition, they publish an extremely informative newsletter, organize a Youth Peace Camp every summer, present expert speakers, study groups, provide nonviolence training, hold a monthly film series, and informal "Potluck and Politics" sessions. They are an invaluable presence in our community and they network with several other local and national groups working for non-violence and social justice, such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation, United for Peace and Justice, Alliance for Sustainable Communities Lehigh Valley, and many others.

In September 2014, I met with four amazing women who have been involved with LEPOCO since its early years – Fran Dreisbach, Susie Ravitz, Nancy Tate, and Mimi Lang.

FRAN DREISBACH

Fran Dreisbach had just celebrated her 90th birthday a few days before my visit in her lovely bucolic home outside of Easton. As one of the original founders of LEPOCO, she is deeply loved and respected as the "wise elder" of the group and the "Grandmother of the Peace Movement". Since the 1960s, Fran has become a strong presence and an inspiration to those working for peace and social justice. A retired associate professor of criminal justice and social welfare at Kutztown University, Fran was also the founder of the Christmas Peace Pilgrimage and one of the 19 individuals who walked for the first time the 10-miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem back in 1959. The Pilgrimage has been held without fail every year since. Fran pointed out that although the face of war has changed over time, the message of peace is still relevant today; war is becoming too costly for powers to pursue. "The impact of the economy has made a big change. We can't as a nation continue to pile up armaments and expect to win people over," she said. The idea for the Pilgrimage was conceived by Robert Euler, a Quaker from York, Pa. While war and hatred continue to ravage the world, Fran argues, there is also another enemy: commercialism. The meaning of the season is often eclipsed by material

wants instead of spiritual needs. "This is a season to be joyful and focused, instead of being out there buying," she says. (articles.philly.com)

To young people who are new to community engagement and who at times may question "What difference that it make?" Fran says, "You do what is right, regardless of the outcome. There are times when we gather thousands of people, we go to Washington on various issues. And we are not paid attention to, there may be a few media pictures and that's it. But, if it's needful, and you feel the need to speak out, be a presence and speak out." Fran emphasizes the importance of being part of one's community. "I'm definitely community minded. I think affiliation with your neighborhood, your church, synagogue, or mosque is vital." Instead of using the term "community activist", Fran prefers "engaged" or "energized". "(T)here is a plethora of activities that are possible...It's not that everybody is going to get involved in everything but choose one area that interests you. It could be related to the economy, or elders, or struggling families, there are so many areas that could be tackled." (*Interview, Sept. 2014*)



www.peacewalk.org



December 2013: Fran Dreisbach with two young participants at the 54th Annual Christmas Peace Pilgrimage. (Source: www.peacewalk.org)

SUSAN RAVITZ

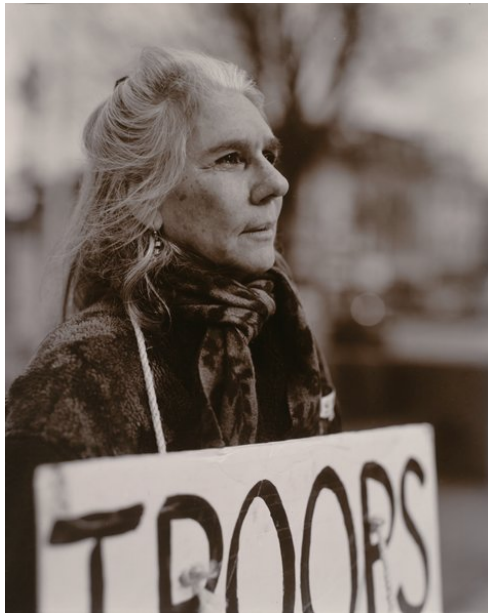
I met with Susie Ravitz, another founding member of LEPOCO, at the group's offices in Bethlehem. She spoke with conviction as she began discussing her 50 years of activism for peace and justice. In November 1965, Susie was one of the few activists who organized a bus trip to Washington, D.C. to protest the War. The day before the demonstration the bus company called to say that the bus drivers were unwilling to drive "a bunch of protesters to an unpatriotic demonstration." They found another bus company willing to make the trip. Four years later, in November 1969, LEPOCO organized four busloads of people to travel to Washington, D. C. for another march, one of the largest anti-war protests in history.

Susie reflected on the past 50 years of her work and said, "Community activists are people who care deeply about an issue which they don't keep to themselves. They try to get their message out and they do that in different ways. I'm someone who is willing to be out on the street with a protest sign, but others write lots of letters to the editor, or lobby their Congress people. Myself, I have certain morals I believe in: I consider myself a pacifist. I have never been in a situation where I have been challenged about my pacifism." Susie remembers a couple of instances where she felt morally obliged to participate in non-violent acts of civil disobedience and allow herself to get arrested for what she believed in. For many years she was involved in the non-violent campaign to de-militarize the small island of Vieques, in Puerto Rico where military training with real ammunition, and the use of heavy metals and depleted uranium resulted in serious environmental concerns, a higher infant mortality rate, and a significantly higher cancer rate compared to the rest of the population of Puerto Rico. Eventually, they won: The U.S. Navy declared that they would cease all military operations in Vieques by 2003.

On another occasion, Susie and other LEPOCO members were protesting the large amount of tax payer's money going in the military budget by distributing leaflets outside a post office in the Lehigh Valley on Tax Day, April 15. They refused to leave when asked to do so, believing firmly in their First Amendment right of free speech. The police arrested them, handcuffed them and took them to the police station. Eventually, they won again: The district attorney of Northampton County decided that LEPOCO members had a Constitutional right to be at the post office and since they were not blocking the entrance to the building, all charges had to be dropped. "I hope that, as a result, many people were informed that they have a First Amendment right to speak out. The First Amendment doesn't say you have to like what one says, just that they have a right to say it," says Susie. (Interview, Sept. 2014)



Susie Ravitz (Center, w/ white t-shirt) being arrested along with 250 others during the campaign of non-violent civil disobedience against the militarization of the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico. (Source: *Lepoco archives*)



Judith Joy Ross, *Susan Ravitz, Protesting the U.S. War in Iraq...*, 2006; gold-toned gelatin silver print, 10 in. x 8 in. (25.4 cm x 20.32 cm); Collection SFMOMA, Purchase through a gift of Helen and Richard Spalding; © Judith Joy Ross

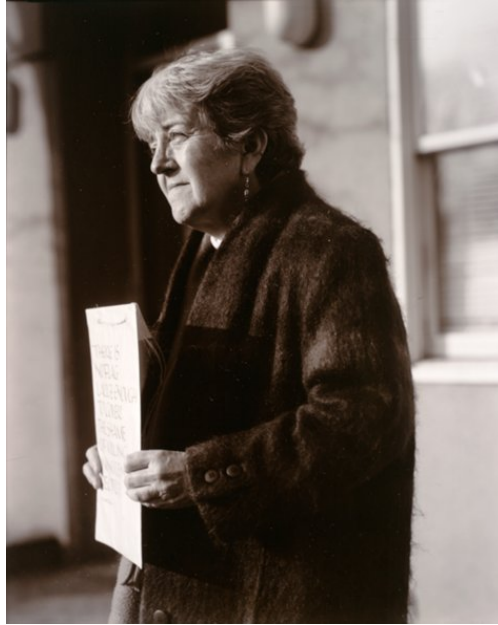
Source: <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/130153#ixzz3NcECw800>
[San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](http://www.sfmoma.org)

Listen to Susie's talk on WDIY's Living Green on global nuclear power concerns [here](#).

NANCY TATE

When I met with Nancy at LEPOCO's office in late September 2014, she was as usual very busy taking care of all the administrative tasks of a very active grass roots group. Nancy has been the coordinator of LEPOCO since 1974. With a small staff and several dedicated volunteers she brings attention to issues which now have included three major wars: Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Nancy has traveled many times to Central and South America, especially Nicaragua and El Salvador. Through her direction, LEPOCO has focused its work on younger people at an annual summer Peace Camp, with teens who face the pressures of consumerism and militarism, and with interns from local colleges and universities. She is also responsible for a monthly newsletter and active email network.

In 1976, Nancy and four other LEPOCO members were arrested in Muhlenberg College as they exercised their First Amendment right of freedom of speech. The case of the "Muhlenberg Five" reached the Pennsylvania Supreme Court which decided in LEPOCO's favor in the case [*Commonwealth of Pennsylvania v. Tate*](#) (1981). Nancy has offered free training in non-violent protest to young students around the Lehigh Valley. She is a firm believer in community engagement through groups embedded in the community. She says, "Many people act on their own but I think that being part of local groups is one of the best places to be active in the community. It just helps when you are facing a problem and you just cannot see a solution, you just sit down with that circle of like-minded people and the kind of creative synergy that goes on there is just very helpful to try to move things forward and to figure out how to take the issue to the community. The only way change has ever come is because of these small groups working together, in my experience." (*Interview, Sept. 2014*)



Judith Joy Ross, *Nancy Tate, Protesting the U.S. War in Iraq...*, 2006; gold-toned gelatin silver print, 10 in. x 8 in. (25.4 cm x 20.32 cm); Collection SFMOMA, Purchase through a gift of Elisa and Haluk Soykan;

© Judith Joy Ross

Source: <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/130141#ixzz3NcEhfEld>
[San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#)

Nancy's talk following the 51st Annual Nazareth to Bethlehem Christmas Peace Pilgrimage entitled "*We Have Only Begun – Reflections on our Work for Peace*" can be viewed [here](#) (Part I) and [here](#) (Part II).

MIMI LANG

On a bright morning in September, 2014, I visited Mimi in her sun-lit home in Bethlehem. A retired rehabilitation nurse, Mimi has been involved with LEPOCO since the 1980s. A strong advocate for cuts in military spending, Mimi argues that money could be better spent addressing unemployment, poverty, illiteracy and hunger. To those who argue that the group's protests are "unpatriotic", Mimi replies, "I think people like us are more patriotic. We pay more attention; we read the Constitution; we care so much and we speak up. A lot of people support war without thinking."

When not protesting on the street, Mimi works tirelessly on all LEPOCO events – from the annual dinner and Peace Pilgrimage, to the annual commemoration for Hiroshima and Nagasaki and numerous fundraising events. She is the facilitator of LEPOCO's book club and in her free time she writes poetry, often with a strong peace message – September 11, 2011; nuclear weapons; and the people's struggle in Guatemala are some of her poems' themes. When asked how she maintains a life-long commitment to peace, Mimi replies with a question: "How can you let go of peace and justice in the

world? It's part of who you are. You can't measure the peace movement with results. You never know when you plant a seed. After the recent march on climate change in New York City where 400,000 participated, the Rockefeller Foundation decided to divest from fossil fuels." When asked about the future of the peace movement, she replies "Young people have to do what they decide to do. They are much more tuned-in with things such as Twitter – we don't do that. They are doing other things, like the Occupy Wall Street movement. We have to be respectful of what other people are doing for peace and justice. Writing letters, education, lobbying, we need all those people." (Interview, Sep. 2014)



March 2013: Mimi Lang with members of LEPOCO and local groups Penn Action and Keystone Progress protesting military spending. (Source: eastpenn.thehighvalleyexpress.com)

LEPOCO's website (www.lepoco.org) offers a great deal of information about the group, their activities, and what they believe in:

"LEPOCO members share a vision that we can build a sane and more just world. Gathering strength from our diversity, we work together, and as individuals for nonviolent change, starting in our own community."



[“LEPOCO – A Persistent Presence”](#) is a short documentary created by Nicholson Baker, Sieglind Gatewood and John Pettegrew, produced during the 2009 four-day Lehigh University/SouthSide Film Festival workshop.