

# Little Insurrections: A fond farewell to New York's Peace Pentagon

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Nearly 20 years ago, as I left the War Resisters League, or WRL, offices in lower Manhattan for the first time, I noticed that my fingertips were covered in black soot and ink. My hands were full of tracts and leaflets, and I had been looking through nonviolence training materials for the last hour. I tried to rub the dirt off onto my jeans, but it wouldn't budge and later even soap and water had to work really hard.

A few weeks ago, I went back to 339 Lafayette Street to say goodbye to the appropriately nicknamed Peace Pentagon. The visit reminded me of that sooty, inky afternoon, when the late great and gentle Karl Bissinger gave me a tour of the WRL workroom — teeter-towered floor to ceiling with books, pamphlets, leaflets, posters and signs from every demonstration of the last half century (almost).

Back in that same workroom, sun streamed in the huge loft windows — even though they were caked with lower Manhattan's finest smog particles. There was a hole in the floor large enough to swallow both of my small children. I was supposed to be taping historic photos on a large poster board for display at the party later that evening, but instead I was trying to keep two WRL staffers from throwing away or recycling a single piece of paper. They shot daggers at me and kept stacking things for the recycling bin. Turns out that one person's poorly-lettered sign about a campaign 15 years ago, is another person's recycling.

My hands were filthy again (because someone keeps stealing the hand soap from the bathrooms), but I managed to save what I could: a roll of wrapping paper (not sure why), a ripped "Shut Down Guantanamo" poster and an awesome "It will be a great day when our schools get all the money they need" poster in Spanish with a perfect sneaker print marring the bright yellow. I rolled these treasures up and went back to my project, knowing that everything genuinely historic and important had already been sent to the Swarthmore College Peace Collection archive for some dedicated intern wearing acid free gloves to sort through.

From the first time I was buzzed into 339 Lafayette Street — huffing my way up 20 uneven, steeply-pitched concrete stairs (no elevator, no way, no how) to the heavy red metal door that the *New York Times* found so iconic, and stepping into a packed, bustling office — I was in love. There were dust bunnies, paper clips and tumbleweeds of cat hair everywhere. The desks were huge and pocked, the chairs off kilter and prone to wheeling off on their own over the wavy pitched floors. Every flat surface was covered in bumper stickers and notes. I always had to move precarious piles of papers to carve out a place to sit and work.

Despite this disorder, I always felt like stepping into the office was putting my feet into the continuum of nonviolent resistance; even when I was there for the most mundane reason — to pick up a package that had been sent to me there by mistake or to borrow a pen and legal pad on my way somewhere else. I felt a part of something bigger, older and more powerful than myself and whatever occasion required that pen.

The War Resisters League's offices occupied most of the second floor of the Peace Pentagon — a warren of leftist, progressive, artistic and anarchist groups — for almost half a century. But now, WRL and the other groups sheltered by the A.J. Muste Memorial Institute are moving from the corner of Bleecker and Lafayette Streets on the Lower East Side to rented offices on Canal Street. WRL began renting space in the building in the late 1960s and bought it for \$60,000 in 1974 — the year I was born. Many of its staff were war tax resisters and anti-war activists, and they worried about having an asset that could be seized in lieu of fines or taxes. So, they sold the building to the newly formed A.J. Muste Memorial Institute in 1978 for \$91,000. The Muste Institute ran the building, acting as a very generous landlord to an ever changing clutch of radical causes, in addition to providing fiscal sponsorship, grants and technical support to many progressive organizations.

I joined the War Resisters League National Committee in 2000 and got my very own key to the building (which I very grudgingly gave up when I moved to Connecticut in 2009). But for those nine wonderful years I had a home at the corner of Bleecker and Lafayette — a respite from the consumer madness and constant striving of Manhattan, a refresher in what really matters — people, progress, pacifism and posters!

Like in any relationship, it wasn't all perfect. A group of us learned of the building's shortcomings and structural needs, as well as the Muste board's interest in selling 339 Lafayette in 2006. We organized ourselves into Friends of 339 and tried to come up with ways to keep the building in the peace movement — lots of meetings, lots of creativity and a great architecture competition. The result: failure and heart break.

Nevertheless, my favorite time of all in my relationship with the office was the almost-full year I spent living at the New York Catholic Worker in 2010. I would finish up a shift of cooking and serving lunch to dozens of hungry women, take off my apron in the now quiet and relatively clean kitchen and walk several blocks over to the WRL office. Once there, I would help plan the anti-nuclear activities we held during the United Nations nonproliferation meeting or our anti-torture work with Witness Against Torture for the afternoon. I would still smell like bean soup, old coffee and bleach as I warmed up the computer and started making phone calls.

This short walk across a few blocks of rapidly gentrifying Lower Manhattan would bring to mind the long and close relationship between two very different anarchist non-institutions. And it was more than our mutual affection for old papers and genial tolerance of disorder. The Catholic Worker and the War Resisters League share a belief that it is people power not power over people that is going to change our politics and our priorities. We are Catholics and atheists alike, who believe that more often than not it is the still, small voice that needs to be heard. We both believe that it is not more leaders or better rhetoric, but rather principled, strategic action, vision and sacrifice that is needed.

I checked in with longtime War Resisters League member and once-executive director David McReynolds about this friendship of conscience. He lives sort of equidistant between the WRL and the Worker in a rent-controlled apartment amid \$4 cups of coffee, \$15 burger joints and more dog accessory stores than laundromats. He told of how Catholic Worker co-founder and now Catholic candidate for sainthood Dorothy Day decided to non-cooperate with air raid drills in Manhattan in the late 1950s. Picketing in front of the jail where Day was being held afterwards, McReynolds thought that resisting these air raid drills was something that could involve masses of people. He

and others in the War Resisters League worked on a three-prong strategy designed to protect people who wanted to register their dismay and outrage at this Cold War coercion exercise, but who couldn't or wouldn't get arrested.

Catholic Worker folks and the WRL worked together to organize mass sit-ins during the drills, which were compulsory under New York City law. WRL put out the call (even printed up special match books with information). Five hundred people showed up at the appointed time to expose that there is no running from a nuclear war, there is only disarmament and peaceful coexistence. Many were arrested.

"In 1961," McReynolds recalled, "we repeated the process, again a WRL event, and drew 2,000 people. Over a hundred of us were arrested, including the entire WRL staff. All of us got 25 days in jail (the longest term I ever served). But it was the end of the civil defense drills in New York. There was a dialectic between Dorothy Day's witness, and my somewhat more cautious, quasi-Marxist approach — it was the picketing that led to my eventually doing something. And it was my concern about involving as many people as possible, which led to the three-level strategy."

Joanne Sheehan (my mother-in-law) first came to 339 Lafayette as an organizer with the Catholic Peace Fellowship, or CPF, in 1970 and recalls the building as an incubator for the peace movement. "CPF was pretty male dominated and sexist," she explained. "As a young and developing feminist, I was challenged and educated by the women in the building to stick it out and have the hard conversations about the kind of world we want to create. War Resisters League chairs like Norma Becker and Irma Zigas were strong women and committed activists who mentored me. They did so much of the 'behind-the-scenes' work that every movement needs. The building was also home to One Big Union, a collective of women typesetters, who were inspiring."

Long before social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, just opening the door to the building was a chance to network, learn, connect and appreciate the intersections between different struggles and movements. "Just inside the front door, the walls were like a huge bulletin board crammed with flyers and posters," she said. "That was the starting point. I picked so much up by osmosis, just being in the building with people holding so many different pieces of our work." On Friday nights, people would step out of their offices and cubicles and help prepare copies of *WIN Magazine* for mailing. "We would drink beer, eat pizza, label magazines and talk about what was going on in the world, in the movement and in our lives. We built community."

We live in a different world today. Bulletin boards? Flyers? Mailing parties? Offices with doors? In a stretch of Manhattan that is almost entirely gentrified, 339 Lafayette seems like a tiny brick-and-mortar relic smooshed between massive spires of steel and glass. It makes me think of a picture book that my kids love called "The Little House," in which a small rural home is subsumed into an ever-expanding metropolis. The descendants of the original owners eventually move the house to a new stretch of country road amid apple orchards and everyone lives happily ever after.



The WRL bathroom in 2016 (left) versus 1969 (right).

(WNV / Ed Hedemann and David McReynolds)

I am so sad to say goodbye to the Peace Pentagon. I am holding on tight to an image of the Peace Pentagon at 339 Lafayette Street that is now totally obsolete: as a constant, visible, rough-around-the-edges home to activists and artists in the heart of Manhattan's manic, gold-plated, empty-headed boomtown. But then I remember the bathroom. It is hard to be sepia-toned nostalgic about bombed out bathrooms where someone is always stealing the soap.

The War Resisters League and the other residents of 339 Lafayette are in the process of moving to newly remodeled offices at Canal and Elizabeth. I am pretty sure the soap dispenser is attached to the wall. And after four decades of having to scale the stairs every day and turn away people who can't handle them, the building's elevator will mean a new kind of accessibility and intersectionality is possible. Onward War Resisters League! Cue the bagpipes, pull out the tissues, and let's get moving.

*Originally posted here.*