

Wilson Riles

“Cities: An Effective, Sane Voice for Peace”

October 23, 2008. Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa.

Conference on Nuclear Abolition, Climate Protection, and Our Cities’ Future

I’m very pleased to be here, for a lot of reasons: I’m being inspired by all of you and what you are doing. I also had the wonderful opportunity to meet again with a fellow colleague from the American Friends Service Committee, a fellow regional director, and I greatly appreciate that.

I come here both as a student of municipal government and cities as well as someone who has developed a great appreciation for community and the power of community. As an organizer and someone who is trying to develop an organizing theory and organizing skills, I’ve come to an understanding where a lot of community organizers have come from: that there is a process that we need to go through as we begin to grapple with local issues and larger issues. It is a process of research, a process of reflection and a process of action and then again back to research, reflection and action and that is a powerful way of moving forward and advancing what we are about.

One of the things that struck me early on as a council member in Oakland was that a lot of local elected officials and people in local communities suffer from an inferiority complex. They don’t believe that they’re important enough and valuable enough to deal with some of these larger questions and they take a position, as was reflected earlier here, that these are not issues that ought to be of any concern at the local level. But the reality is that almost whatever issue you talk about, it is at the local level that it has its impact; the local level is ground zero for what is going on, including militarism. One of the things that Jackie reminded me during the Nuclear Freeze campaign that we had in Oakland, where there were folks that said “why should local people in Oakland be concerned about that, that’s not a local issue,” she said just ask the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki whether or not nuclear weapons are a local issue. All of these issues come home at the local level and have their impact at the local level and local people have to struggle with them. One of the things that I have learned over a period of time is that if you want to know where creativity and innovation and new ways of looking for things to change come from, it’s not from Sacramento or the state government and its certainly not in Washington DC. The changes that eventually develop at those levels more often than not start at the local level. So the local community and what goes on in the local communities is tremendously important.

We now have a mayor in Oakland, Congressman Ron Dellums, and one of the things that I recently heard him say since he has become the Mayor is that all of his prior years in Congress were only preparation for him to be able to deal with what he now has to deal with as the mayor of a small city. So the job that Mayor Cownie and other mayors here have to deal with is a hard job, it’s difficult job, it’s an important job, it’s a very valuable job. Those in the local community need to be challenged, we need to be challenged, to move forward and take our place and in a sense bring back the kind of power and influence that local communities have, not just in our nation but around the world.

The beginnings, the cradle of democracy, was in the Greek city states. The Greeks came together and began to struggle with the questions about equality and economics at that very place. A lot of people think that cities developed because of commerce, but that's not how Greek city states developed. Greek city states developed as a place where those in the agricultural community could come and find a place where they were able to defend themselves, it was a defensible space within the community for when the whole community was attacked. And they found places to come together in order to provide that kind of security and safety for themselves. After coming together in that way, then the market began to develop there, where people began to share their resources and their talent. It became a very important cultural space in the community for people to share their intellect, to share their concerns and to begin to form the kind of relationships and communities and processes that eventually ended up in the democratic process which has now spread all over the world. So how important are cities? Tremendously important. How important are local communities? Tremendously important in shaping and changing the world.

I spent some time in the Peace Corps and I was assigned to Sierra Leone in West Africa, one of the poorest countries in the world. I saw some of the impacts from what was going on in terms of international commerce and the kinds of foreign policy that has resulted in destroying communities all over the world in so many ways. I also had an opportunity to visit Scotland and developed a clear understanding that folks in that community saw some pride in what those folks were doing in terms of being involved in the international advance of England and Scotland; they had pride in their ancestors and what they were doing and they raised those things up. I also had a chance to begin to understand how the abolition of slavery happened. The abolition of slavery happened when folks in England began to understand what the impacts were of what they were doing and escaped slaves came into their community and worked with them. And a small group of people in England, a very small group of people, began to organize and come together and build a kind of abolition movement that eventually swept the world and brought an end to slavery. That is the kind of nuclear abolition movement that we are talking about starting here now, by what's going on here and in other local communities.

Local communities standing up are tremendously important for making a difference to what is happening in the world. We are talking about coming together for our own self defense, sharing our intellect and our understanding, beginning to understand what the effects are of what we are doing around the world and making those changes locally, which can have tremendous impact, beginning with our own family, then into our larger community and spreading in concentric circles out to the wider community. More and more, our communities here in the United States are microcosms of what is happening in the nation, microcosms of what is happening in the world. In Oakland we have over 44 languages that are brought to our schools. We have people from all over the world that are there. Oakland is one of the most diverse communities that there is in the United States, and California is clearly one of the most diverse states in the nation.

Yet we are also negatively impacted by what is happening around the world. One of the early findings that I discovered in Oakland, was when I first got on the city council and the Oakland City Council had just bought a helicopter. Why? Because the Vietnam War was ending and the helicopter manufacturers didn't have a place to sell their helicopters anymore so they developed a marketing plan to sell helicopters to cities as a way to secure the cities. Flying way over head

they thought they would have some impact on reducing crime. It didn't happen. Now cities, through their own innovations, have discovered that a better way of dealing with that question is with community policing, where folks get together in their neighborhoods and begin to work on the root causes of crime and find ways to resolve it. That is an innovation that came from a local level; it didn't come from on high.

We talk about youth violence and a number of other issues that are rooted in the problems within our economic system. That kind of violence feeds back on itself: as we become more violent as a country our young people see violence as a solution to solving their own problems. I was struck a few years ago by my own teenage daughters using the word "the bomb". They were talking about something that was supposed to be really powerful and special and unusual: this particular record was "the bomb", this particular celebrity was "the bomb". What "bomb" are we talking about? The atomic bomb. The supreme apex of militarism. They took that concept up and used it to describe other things of superb so-called value.

We look in Oakland at the fact that, in terms of the nuclear energy around the world, when the United States government helps South Korea to develop nuclear energy, part of the agreement is that they don't keep their spent nuclear fuel rods, they have to be brought back to the United States. Where do they come back to? They come back to the port of Oakland, they get put on trucks in order to be trucked to places where they can be essentially housed and stored. They come through Oakland streets. Oakland had a severe problem with an earthquake; we had a double-decker freeway that collapsed, tons and tons of concrete falling down on cars. If there had been a truck with one of these nuclear fuel rods in it, I don't care how much preparation they had done to make those safe, that would not have been safe and it would be local destruction. Oakland would be at ground zero in terms of the nuclear industry, in terms of what was going on. We live in Oakland close to Livermore Labs which is developing and designing a lot of these new weapons. We go there and we take homeless people there and other people there to understand what is being done at Livermore Labs and how that is robbing us of the resources that we need in Oakland in order to solve some of the problems that we have there. These are critical local issues that have local impacts that local communities ought to be talking about and finding ways to stand up and to oppose.

Oakland was tremendously affected by the Vietnam War in that the Hmong and the Vietnamese people came back to Oakland without any kind of preparation, without any kind of consultation with the people in the community and ended up with the kind of difficulty of crossing language lines and culture lines and causing more problems within our community. These are issues around immigration that, in the larger scale in terms of the impact of U.S. foreign policy and trade relations and so forth, that we need to get involved in because we are going to be affected whether we choose to or not.

Same issue with energy policy. Clearly local communities are affected by energy problems. One great appreciation that I have of some of the work of Liberty Tree is because it is beginning to discover some of the innovative solutions that other cities around the world have discovered and they are beginning to move those kind of discoveries here in the United States, in terms of participatory democracy, in terms of participating in the budgeting in local communities. There is a city in Brazil called Porto Alegre and there in that city more than 60,000 people participate

in the budgeting process for that community. They sit down in local cafes and parks and other places and they talk about what is going on in their community, they talk about what they want to see and they begin to make decisions that impact the quality of their lives and improve their whole community as a result of that, and that's spreading throughout Brazil, and that's spreading throughout the world.

In Oakland we are talking about a sustainable approach to energy, called Community Choice Energy Aggregation where communities come together. They essentially take on the purchase of energy for all of their businesses and their residents and in doing that they can designate whether they want that energy to come from alternative energy sources and they can begin to take those resources and build their own local resources for energy. We are also looking at something that was first tried out in Austria, which is interest-free, inflation-free money. There are more than 30 communities across the United States that have their own local currencies and that helps to turn over the resources in the community to maximize the use of people resources and local resources in some very positive ecological ways that make a difference to how we survive in our own communities without having to buy into the global, rapacious kinds of activities that are destroying other people and that actually are not good for our own communities.

For the sake of our community, for the sake of our nation, for the sake of the planet, what you are doing here is tremendously important. We all need to find ways to stand up and say "no" to nuclear weapons, "no" to the kind of destruction of the environment that is going on. We can be innovative. We are the place to be innovative. We're where most of the innovation and effort has come from, from local communities. We need to take our power back and we can do that. We need to gather in these defensible positions. I understand that even here in Des Moines, you didn't start here in Des Moines as a result of commerce, but a fort that was defensible was the very beginning of Des Moines. So let's come back to together and make that kind of difference and stand up and save the world. We can do it.