

Cancelling The Cancellation

Standing for Peace (and the Constitution) in Flemington

Rob and Claudia and their two kids and I showed up at the Moveon.org-inspired Flemington vigil* scheduled for 7 pm tonight. When we got there the people from the peace group in town told us that it was "cancelled". When we asked why they said that they could not get a permit. They explained that one of their members had been arrested a couple of years ago because of an ordinance that had been passed by the town council supposedly outlawing any gathering without a permit. Those of us from out of town looked at each other and decided we were "cancelling the cancellation". We tried to explain to the group that it was their constitutional right to stand on a public street as long as they were not blocking pedestrians or traffic and were not breaking any laws. We offered them signs but they declined to take any and continued to sit on the benches in front of the courthouse. In a few minutes one woman got up and said, "I'm not living in fear anymore" and came over and took one of our yellow and red signs. Soon another man from Frenchtown arrived. After a few more people showed up we consisted of around 10 people including a few children. We stood along the sidewalk as traffic passed, holding our signs calling for an end to the Occupation of Iraq. One of the little kids held a sign that said, "Build schools, not bombs." Another sign said, "Evil triumphs when good people do nothing."

Amidst a multitude of peace signals and thumbs up from the passing motorists we got only one rude outburst (unintelligible) from a driver. For Flemington, that was a pleasant surprise. I remember some very disturbing scenes in that town at the beginning of the war when peace vigilers were very rudely treated by pro-war residents. After almost seven years of endless wars, I wondered how many pro-Bush people there still were in this town.

I had an interesting conversation with one gentleman who admitted to me that he was afraid of getting arrested but was concerned about feeling so intimidated. He said that the problem was that the town was too "conservative." I responded that the attempt to prohibit our assembly is neither a Democratic nor Republican issue, but a Constitutional one. The right of peaceful assembly should be vigorously defended by every American who believes in the principles upon which our country was founded over 230 years ago. I added that theoretically, the Constitution's most vigorous defenders ought to be those who claim to be Conservatives!

No officer or town official arrived to challenge any of the vigilers during the hour we were there. They just never showed up. But if they had we would have informed the officials that the right to peacefully assemble is a right no one can take from us. It is our birthright and if we are afraid to fight for it, I'm afraid we are in eminent danger of losing it. The Flemington group never left their benches. As we gathered our signs at the end of the vigil and started to find our way out of town I was reminded of Benjamin Franklin's stern warning:

*"Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety
deserve neither liberty nor safety."*

-Sharleen Leahey

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*At last count there were over 600 Moveon.org-inspired vigils taking place all throughout the country tonight to call for our Congressional representatives to "Take A Stand" and withdraw the funding for the illegal occupation of Iraq. I can only hope that enough hardened hearts are softened so that we can have an end to this carnage which is being perpetrated in our names this
At the end of the vigil we gathered our signs and left. very night! I just pray those beautiful children who stood at the vigil with us can soon live in a nation at peace with itself and with the world.

Sharleen Leahey is a singer and songwriter and former organizer with Somerset Voices of Peace and Justice based in Central New Jersey where she led a monthly singing vigil for peace at the Army Recruiting Station.