

'Your life is your action'

Activist Juanita Nelson dies at 91

By RICHIE DAVIS Recorder Staff

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Juanita Nelson was a lifelong activist who was arrested numerous times at tax resistance and civil rights protests during the 1960s and 1970s and beyond.

Recorder file/Paul Franz

GREENFIELD — Juanita Nelson, an ardent pacifist, war tax resister, civil rights activist and supporter of local, organic agriculture, died peacefully Monday at Poet's Seat Health Care Center following a period of declining health. She was 91.

Nelson, a lifelong activist who was arrested numerous times at tax resistance and civil rights protests during the 1960s and 1970s and beyond, moved to Deerfield with her husband, Wally, in 1974 to practice organic farming at Woolman Hill, a Quaker conference center. Granted lifetime use of a small plot of land there, the couple built a small, simple home with no electricity or running water, and became mentors to many people young and old, for leading a life of material simplicity close to their convictions.

"If you believe in something, it's forever," Nelson told *The Recorder* in 1980. "If you can't build on what you've done before, you're not getting anyplace. ... Your life is your action."

She and her husband, Wally, who died in 2002, helped found the Pioneer Valley War Tax Resisters, the Greenfield Farmers Market and the Valley Community Land Trust. After his death, she was instrumental in launching Greenfield's Free Harvest Supper, which has become a tradition in the community, and helped create the annual Winter Fare to celebrate year-round agriculture.

"We need our farmers, and they need us," she told *The Recorder* in a 2006 article about how she came up with the idea for the Harvest Supper. In 2007, she was named a finalist in the National Cooperative Grocers Association's "Cooperate for Community" contest honoring people working for a more sustainable food supply through cooperation.

Born Juanita Morrow in Cleveland, Ohio, on Aug. 17, 1923, the "dirt-poor" daughter of Eula Jean (Middlebanks) Morrow and Oscar Morrow Sr., she graduated in 1941 from Cleveland's Central High School and attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., on

scholarship.

Nelson won a poetry contest at age 17 and used the prize money to pay for her family's first telephone, she told an interviewer for an oral history archived by the Memorial Hall Museum in Old Deerfield.

It was at 16, though, when Nelson first stood her ground for civil rights, while on a train ride with her mother to visit her grandparents in Georgia. After changing trains in Cincinnati and seeing that they were in a segregated "Jim Crow car," then complaining to her mother, Juanita defiantly moved ahead to sit in a "whites only car," progressing gradually to each car in front of it. Only a black porter "bothered her," she said, because "he was afraid that something would happen to me. ... Then I went back and sat by my mother, and I felt better because I had expressed myself."

She served as secretary of Howard University's National Association for the Advancement of Colored People chapter and experienced her first arrest while protesting lunch-counter segregation in the nation's capital. Nelson and two friends were refused service, asked to see the manager and were told he wasn't in.

"Well, we have plenty of time. We'll just sit here," they said, ordering hot chocolate for which they were charged a quarter each, instead of the posted 10-cent price. They paid the dime, walked out and were arrested.

In 1943, Nelson enrolled in Western Reserve University, majoring in journalism, and then worked as a reporter for The Cleveland Call and Post, a newspaper serving the city's African-American community. In that role, she met her future husband while working on a story about segregated conditions in the Cuyahoga County Jail, where he was awaiting trial as a conscientious objector.

Juanita worked with the Congress of Racial Equality on both local and national levels.

When Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., marked the birth anniversary of the Rev. Martin Luther King in 1983, the Nelsons were asked by Tuskegee Institute to give the sermon — one that Juanita Nelson remarked "was nonsectarian, of course."

Beyond civil rights

In 1948, the Nelsons refused to pay taxes for war and military preparations. They joined Peacemakers, a pacifist group dedicated to non-payment of federal taxes and to non-registration for the draft, as well as to promotion of nonviolence in all areas of life.

"We still felt we were so entangled in a system that called for war, we wanted to go further and get ... out of the system," Nelson told The Recorder.

In 1950, they became part of an integrated household in Cincinnati, which led to tensions within a neighborhood where segregation was the norm. Throughout those years, and beyond, the Nelsons encountered racial discrimination and faced arrest.

She earned a degree in speech pathology from Ohio State University in 1955, hoping to work on a contractual basis without withholding taxes that she felt would contribute to the federal military.

The Nelsons moved to Philadelphia in 1956 and lived in Powelton Village, a culturally diverse and historic neighborhood. They spent four months at Koinonia Farm in Americus, Ga., which had come under attack for refusal to discriminate based on skin color and where shots

were fired into the community.

The couple began their farming life together in 1970 when they moved to Ojo Caliente, N.M., growing and selling produce. Wanting to simplify their lives in the face of U.S. military intervention in Southeast Asia, they also attempted to become as self-sufficient as possible, learning to heat and cook with wood, preserve food and even make their own soap.

In New Mexico, they were visited by Randy Kehler, who had just been released from serving a federal prison term in Texas for refusing to serve in the Vietnam War. They mentioned that they wanted to return back east but that land there was unaffordable. Kehler began teaching at a Quaker-run alternative school at Woolman Hill in Deerfield. On its behalf, he invited the couple to teach farming there, but ever-humble, the Nelsons asked instead if there was land there where they could homestead, “to be good neighbors to the school and its students, and share their life with them,” in Kehler’s words.

They moved to Deerfield in the spring of 1974, farming their half-acre known as “The Bean Patch,” from which they soon were able to deliver organic vegetables to the new Greenfield Farmers Market.

In the Woolman Hill house, where Nelson continued to live without electricity and running water after Wally’s death in 2002, she would laugh as she told people, “I have running-in water, running-up water and running-out water,” carried in from a hand-drawn well and carried upstairs to pour into a basin and gravity-fed plumbing system. Yet the sturdy, hardworking woman always emphasized that she was not trying to prove anything through the way she chose to live.

“I don’t appreciate being put up on a pedestal,” she told The Recorder 1980. “I don’t use electricity because I don’t like the system that would bring it to me. If there are winners in life, there have to be losers. Rather than be either, I refuse to play the game.”

Following the election of Barack Obama, the nation’s first black president, she surprised many by announcing that she hadn’t voted out of principle — and, in fact had only voted for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in 1944.

“He’s going to be presiding over something that’s the same old, same old,” she said. “I vote with what I do or don’t do. ... I want a different world. I want utopia.”

Beyond words

Nelson authored many articles and poems, as well as the 1988 book, “A Matter of Freedom.” But while thoughtful and articulate about her beliefs, what mattered most to her were her actions.

A close friend with whom she lived for a while after leaving Woolman Hill in 2011, Ellie Kastanopoulos, said that after working on civil rights issues, the Nelsons “came to the point where the driving force for them was not skin color. They felt that was irrelevant, that everyone deserved a chance for a good life.”

Kastanopoulos said, “They were about human rights issues, that we have to live our lives according to our beliefs. And they lived that way, as passionately as they could.”

Aaron Falbel of Sunderland, who helped Nelson farm “The Bean Patch” after Wally’s death, said that leading “every aspect of life” as a way of practicing non-violence was what drew so many people to her and Wally. ... She was very clear-sighted and very clear-headed.

She knew what was what and she felt there was plenty for her to do and to work on in the area in which she lived, within her habitual reach.”

For the Nelsons, encouraging people to grow their own food and to support local farming as part of the local economy was another expression of their all-encompassing non-violence, expressing their wills through their lives against agribusiness and an exploitative economic system.

A bumper sticker on their wall at Woolman Hill, Falbel recalled, said, “Peace would destroy civilization as we know it” because of all of its inherent “aggression toward the environment or the planet.

“She was a beacon for me, lighting the way of right livelihood, if only we had enough courage to follow her,” said Falbel. “Juanita really saw non-violence as a living philosophy, a standard by which to view everyday actions.”

Eveline MacDougall of Northfield, who like Kastanopoulos, Kip Moeller, Kehler and his wife, Betsy Corner, cared for Nelson in their homes in her final years, called the steadfast activist “the most practical person I’ve ever met, on a day-to-day, minute- to-minute level. “

In a 2009 interview, she told The Recorder, “She seems to have a singleness of purpose that’s been very impressive for me. ... First and foremost for her seems to be putting it into action. It’s really grounded. There’s no enshrining. Instead of a lifestyle, it’s a life.”

Kehler — whose income-tax refusal led to government seizure of their home, a standoff with protesters at the site and with Nelson’s arrest for several days along with other occupiers — said her gift was “a very practical, but profound wisdom in how to live in relationship to other people and the earth. What we learned from her was that one way to honor that kind of commitment to compassionate, egalitarian relationship with everyone was to live more simply and to disengage from an economic system that’s highly unequal and uncompassionate and causes great suffering in the world. She didn’t teach us by her words, but by her life, daily, how she lived.”

Kehler quoted a friend: “Everywhere she and Wally went, community was created in their wake. It didn’t even matter whether you agreed with them or not; People just loved being in their presence.”

A celebration of Nelson’s life is planned for this spring.

***** In an extensive interview on the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association’s American Centuries website, you can hear or read Juanita Nelson’s own description of growing up “dirt poor” in Cleveland, encountering segregation and fighting for Civil Rights, and on her life with husband Wally Nelson in Philadelphia, Georgia and New Mexico before moving to Deerfield together in 1974 to live simply as an expression of their strongly held commitment toward nonviolence.

<http://bit.ly/1wUoeQ7> You can reach Richie Davis at: rdavis@recorder.com or 413-772-0261, Ext. 269



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Recorder file photo



Juanita Nelson, left, and her husband Wally, right, protest in front of the then-Internal Revenue Service office in Greenfield in 1980.

Recorder file photo