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InnerView: Far from the "lunatic fringe"; Sue Hilderbrand brings energy, experience to Peace and Justice Center

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Chico Enterprise-Record

Article Launched:07/31/2007 02:33:17 PM PDT

Sue Hilderbrand makes it clear: "We want elected officials to know — we are not the lunatic fringe. We are organized."

Hilderbrand was among Chico Peace and Justice Center supporters who gathered last week at City Plaza to encourage citizens to call Congressman Wally Herger and express disapproval with money spent on the war in Iraq.

They made phone booth replicas from cardboard, painted them bright red, and for two hours last Tuesday and Wednesday made cell phones available so people could call the congressman.

"We aren't keeping track of how many callers we get each day," she explained. "We're doing this now, the second week in August and the middle of September. It's a coordinated effort that's being done statewide. Maybe Iowa or Montana will be next. And it's not just that we want peace. It's a very complicated situation."

Since April, Hilderbrand has been director of Chico Peace and Justice Center. A self-described political theorist, she speaks freely and articulately about what she thinks and believes, about what she has read and where she has been.

Stopping funding of the war in Iraq is paramount to Hilderbrand. "Right now things like health care and the environment are taking a back seat."

In college and graduate school, Hilderbrand appreciated debate and discussion. She still does. "It makes my brain feel good."

She remembers being in London when the first Iraq war started in 1991. "I got an international view of the U.S. People yelled at me — they thought the war was our fault."

"The war in Iraq and Afghanistan show there are bigger problems in the world. Really I got active after 9-11."

Hilderbrand came to Chico two years ago when her partner, cartographer Seth Paine, got a job at the Nature Conservancy. Living in Phoenix and thinking about perhaps a trip to sub-Saharan Africa, the prospect of moving to a California valley town didn't thrill Hilderbrand at first. But she warmed to the idea when she found Chico's Peace and Justice Center online.

She appreciates the center's support of fair trade, and the sale of fair trade items there. "A fair trade program most directly impacts what goes on in the world," she said.

Free trade, she explained, puts no restrictions on employers and their products are sold cheaply. "There are no obstacles to what they can do in free trade. They are making money at the cost of workers, the environment, civil liberties."

Fair trade items cost more, but she said they're worth it. "Fair trade ensures that children are not employed or exploited, that workers are paid well and there is no waste dumped in rivers."

Hilderbrand met Paine while they were serving in the Peace Corps in Morocco. "I was a rural-socio-economics planner. I worked on a national park, which was the largest cedar forest in Africa. I dealt with social, economic and political forces and saw that they all work together."

She and Paine travel whenever they can, and it's never about luxury. "We will wait four hours for a taxi to fill up, or spend 10 cents on a bus ride to travel 30 miles ... We want to take it all in."

She has spent time in jail for political reasons. "People think it's brave. Actually I'm scared to death, but I'm more scared not to do anything than I am to sit in jail."

Hilderbrand says she committed to directing the Chico Peace and Justice Center for two years, and she is open to change in Chico, or beyond.

"Chico is fun, and it's the smallest place I've ever lived. I do want to change the world, I want to be effective."

Small groups can be powerful, she said. "The impeachment of Nixon started with a grassroots effort."

Staff writer Mary Nugent can be reached at 896-7764 or mnugent@chicoer.com.

In a nutshell

Name: Sue Hilderbrand

Roots: Born in Germany, grew up in New York, Virginia

Age: 39

Occupation: Director of Chico Peace and Justice Center, part time political science teacher at Butte College, does KZFR radio show with Paul O'Rourke-Babb.

Education: Bachelor's degree in political science from Colorado State University, master's in political theory from American University in Washington, D.C.

Lesson from father: "My dad encouraged me to be curious, to ask questions. He taught me how to be professional ... I did government organizational work with the big dogs for six months in D.C. There were days I had to wear a suit."

Lesson in life: "I worked as a bartender in many bars while I was in school. I learned how to talk with people."

Pride of Chico Peace and Justice Center: First in the nation to organize a solidarity campaign supporting Cindy Sheehan and set up a Camp Casey; one of the groups responsible for bringing her to Chico in May.

Quote: "The revolution is a process, not an event."

— unknown

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