

Alison Napier

So um, thank you very much for speaking to us, this is great.

A pleasure.

Would you start by telling me why you went to Greenham, and I suppose what your arrival there was like - how you got there?

Well I was living in um, Aberdeen at the time, which is 530 miles from Greenham, and I was a student. And um, I kind of went to Greenham by accident. And I was studying sociology, and that was my introduction to politics, and through politics that was my introduction to feminism, and through feminism that was my introduction to coming out as a lesbian. And that was my introduction to just meeting loads and loads of interesting women who went horse riding and joined the Tory party and that kind of thing. So I was kind of around the Women's Action group and Lesbian's group and fellow students, other women who weren't students in Aberdeen - probably from Lesbian's Group, actually because that was a pan-Aberdeen group, you didn't have to be a student. So that made it more community based, I guessed. And I hadn't really consciously heard of Greenham, but I was known as somebody who had a minibus license, and I occasionally drove groups of youngsters up and down Scotland to community centres and that kind of thing, and so somebody I knew approached me and said 'A few of us are going to go down to Greenham, would you drive our minibus for us?' And I had to ask what Greenham was, and where it was, and discovered where it was. So that was kind of how I first found myself going to Greenham. I wasn't involved in peace groups particularly, um, I went with a group of like-minded women who needed a minibus driver, and it probably wasn't quite as divorced from the proceedings as that makes it sound, because we all had a lot in common, and you know learnt about what was going on, but my politics weren't really peace politics, they were probably angry feminist politics that hadn't quite morphed into peace politics yet. So that was how I first went to Greenham - by sharing the driving of the minibus, overnight from Aberdeen, for 530miles, to Greenham, and arriving sort of in the morning some time, having stopped at Southwaite services for a banana and a plate of chips - that sort of thing. And just this disparate group of women, and maybe a couple of kids arrived at Greenham, and were instantly made welcome and that was a major turning point in my life I would say. Suddenly there were loads and loads of women with values that you just couldn't disagree with. And I learnt so much, I think about the state of the world, generally - a huge subject, and nuclear weapons and England, nuclear weapons and Scotland - which is a different situation, but no less toxic. Although I think we're quite keen to get rid of ours, but England doesn't want them. But we won't go down that route (laughs), that's a whole

other subject. So yes, that's how I first went to Greenham, I had a minibus license and they needed a minibus driver.

Brilliant. So which gate did you arrive at, do you remember?

We arrived at Yellow Gate.

Ah okay.

Which I think was called the Main Gate, but they didn't want to distinguish them necessarily between main and lesser, so yes, Yellow Gate, um, and I can't remember if we went for a specific event or action, um, but it probably was, given that it had been organised - a trip down from Aberdeen for 530 miles, she said again. But my recollection of the very first time we went is blurred into recollections of loads and loads of the other times we went. But the thing I remember from all of those visits - certainly from Yellow Gate was women round the fire, just shoo-ggling up to make space for whoever has arrived, the kettle going on and you know the mugs get rinsed with a bit of water from the kettle, and tea is dispensed, and 'Where are you from?' And just really friendly.

Oh lovely.

So yes, very good.

How often did you end up going then, did you stay over or did you just visit?

When we were doing weekend trips down from Aberdeen, we would just be staying a couple of nights. After I finished at university I went down many more times and stayed for much longer - stayed for, probably the longest I stayed was two or three weeks maybe, and then got caught up in court cases, and prison and things like that.

Did you go to prison?

Well, almost. Because the prison was actually full - Holloway was full of Greenham women, it was fab. And um, so when me and the little cohort that I was with were sentenced to seven days for non-payment of fine for, I think that was trespass, yes that was the trespass, um, they had to hold us in the cells underneath Newbury police station. Which is actually illegal, um it's not meant to be used as detention, so it was a small cell, um with nothing in it other than a big, a small kind of bottle glass strip of window at the top, and a bed about half the width of what I'm sitting on just now.

And how long were you in there for?

Um, well we got out after five days for good behaviour - there wasn't really a lot we could do to be bad! (Laughs). But er, small confined space by yourself.

That's like five days in solitary.

It was five days in solitary, it was 23 and half hours in solitary - we got out for half an hour and we were allowed to walk round this yard thing, which was really bizarre, it was like something out of a film. I knew I was - I'd taken a book with me, I knew I was going to prison, I had no intention of paying this fine. Um, and you know, it's a whole thing - take your shoe laces away and that kind of stuff. But one of the things I do remember was loads of other Greenham women who knew, obviously, who was in prison at any given time, and they would stand outside on the pavement, because we were at a basement level, which is why the glass window - it's a bit like Oscar Wilde, the tiny little patch of blue that prisoners call the sky, or something like that, so that bit of glass was at foot level if you're on the pavement outside. So the women outside would be singing songs round and round Newbury police station, and it was just fab, it was just astonishing. It was quite amazing.

That's lovely.

It was. And I'd taken Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* with me to read, which is really, really big and thick.

That's perfect.

I thought that'll keep me going (laughs).

Yeah, that's a keeper that one, isn't it.

So um, yes, so that was my experience of prison. And it was illegal, and of-course the press weren't interested in its illegality, but the only paper that took it up, because it wasn't just me, there were quite a few of us, being sometimes held in those conditions, um *The Morning Star* took it up as a cause. I don't know that it got terribly far, but at-least it was publicised that we were being held illegally. It wasn't a cause I wanted to rescue, because I felt there were a whole range of things that were illegal that were going on - being held in a police cell for five days didn't really seem top of the agenda. But um no, it was just one more thing wasn't it.

You know the idea of the non-payment of fines, can you tell us a bit more about that - because that was a definite policy wasn't it, at Greenham?

Yes it was.

I sort of mention, why that policy was agreed, and how it was agreed - how did you come to reach decisions like that?

Well that's a very interesting thing isn't it, because there was no committees and nobody came and said 'Well we're meeting in 20 minutes, and this is the agenda, have a quick look at it, and Amber will be taking the minutes'. It was never like that. I don't know how it was agreed. Maybe it was osmosis, maybe everybody just happened to be absolutely clear that this is what they were going to do, but then some people did pay fines. I mean I didn't have four kids at home and a mortgage, so I was in a position to take this as far as I could, and I think for me, and for an awful lot of other women, it was actually a very, very empowering thing to do. Because you've done something that you've been told, from being a kid, you've done something you've been told is bad, and you're told what your punishment is, and you say 'No' and so they take it to the next level, they say 'Well, we wanted you to plead guilty, but you've pleaded not-guilty, so now we're going to, you know, charge you and give you a punishment', and they say what you have to do now is pay a fifty pound fine', and you say 'No', and everyone's going, the magistrate's going 'Oh, shocking, shocking', and um it's like you just stand up for what you know is right, to what is effectively the state, and in this country that is all the state will do to you - they will, um, try to take your money, and you say 'No', so then they say they'll take your liberty, and you say 'Well, okay', and they're sort of, who's won there? It's an incredibly empowering thing, and I think...

And you're sort of taking their money, if they have to incarcerate you.

Yeah, the taxes that we all ended up paying.

Good point.

But to feel that you can just not be cowed by what the state is telling you to do. You've already broken the law, whatever you think of the law, you've broken the law. And to realise that you can break a bad law, and retain your power, I suppose, um, and say 'Well okay, you've done your worst in this country - you put me in a box for five days, and then I came out of the box, and I did it all again.' There's a terribly overused word - empowering, but it was very empowering.

That sounds very empowering.

It's like nothing the state can do can ever actually frighten you again.

That's amazing. Is there anything that - we've heard different stories from some women that the police, and the army - in-particular the American army did - that were frightening. Did you feel there was some people that could act more off-grid, in a sense and be more frightening, or did you feel like in general there was a sort of hands-off approach, or a limit?

From the authorities, you mean?

Yeah.

There was no limit at all - the local police were very rapidly out of their depth, and they brought in the Met, and they had the, um, their shoulder number badges covered so that you couldn't identify them. They came in on horses when we were all sitting down doing non-violent direct action, really, we were sitting in the road, and they galloped their absolutely massive, massive horses towards us, and then they would scream to a halt like that, about that far away from you. Very, very frightening. So I don't think that was, what don't I think that was? I don't think that was a good thing for them to be doing.

No.

And they were violent, they were violent, and they could be violent because we had no means of identifying them, and of-course this is all pre-mobile phone days. Sometimes wonder what it would be like if everybody was filming things on the phones and taking pictures of people, um, there probably would have been far more comeback - I hope there would be far more comeback. But I would be very surprised, I have absolutely no idea, but I would be very surprised if any police officers were ever reprimanded for excessive aggression and violence towards a group of women that were sitting in the road. But they were very rough, and they pulled women very roughly. They pulled women by their earnings, which gave me a real shudder - I don't wear earrings, but the horror of pierced ears, and that was awful to see. So that was our British police. British army I don't recall being very much in evidence. The American army or airforce people at the other side of the fence, some of them looked about 7 years old - clearly they weren't, but they seemed terribly young and fresh faced and 'This isn't what I joined up for', to be on the other side of a razor wire fence looking at thousands of women who are just singing songs at me, you know it's probably much more threatening having that than having to challenge their own idea of why they were there, and what they were doing, and what they were guarding, and why they were actually guarding this, and then suddenly it being noon, everyone's saluting and there's little trumpets playing somewhere. Utterly bizarre. But in terms of what they actually did, and the fact, Susan my - Susan said to mention this, there was a lot of talk of 'zapping' - I don't know if anyone's mentioned 'zapping' to you?

Obviously it's something else that's utterly unprovable probably, but a lot of women became quite unwell. Um, and by 'zapping'.

Tell us what that is a bit more, because I've read about it...

Well it's not something that you see, and I'm a very un-technical person.

Me too!

It may have been sort of like radio waves that they were just sending out, and I think recently - in the past few months the Americans based in Cuba have been complaining that everybody in the embassy in Cuba seems to have been going down with - and so they're blaming the Cubans for zapping them, but er, so, I don't know how that could be clarified. But very often people became inexplicably unwell. Um, and I'm at - you may want to take this out of the interview at some point - I'm at a curious point in my life, I was diagnosed with cancer 3 years ago, then it went away, and now it's come back.

I'm sorry to hear that.

And you find yourself thinking of all the different things that might have contributed to that over the years.

Gosh, yes.

I would never stand up in a court of law and say 'I was zapped in 1983 by the US Airforce, therefore, you know, I'm not very well'. But it was very shocking, covert aggression towards what was a peaceful protest. Um, so those were things that the state from both sides of the Atlantic were doing.

That makes a lot of sense, and I know exactly the process you mean, because my mum died of cancer, and we um had the same, I had the same when I started reading about zapping and you can't help but go through your mind...

All the different situations.

Yeah. Um. I was going to ask you, I'm just going to back a bit if that's okay?

Oh yes, I jump about.

It's fascinating what you were saying - I was really interested in um, you said a bit about non-violent direct action. I'd love you to tell us a bit more about that, and I also

wondered how your politics as - angry feminist politics sort of sat with you going to Greenham, and someone practicing NVDA, which is non-violent direct action? Can you talk a little bit about that for us?

Well I don't think angry equates with violence.

No, no, I agree. For the listeners!

Yeah, non-violent direct action - I hadn't heard of non-violent direct action either, and some people were a bit sort of sniffy about it I think, because - I'm not quite sure, it was difficult, I think it was equated with 'Let's change the world by writing letters to our local councillors' or something like that. It was seen as something you shouldn't really need to have to do, but I think that was maybe later. But we did do, not proper workshops in Aberdeen about it, but just little practicings - the main thing I remember about it was just not to resist, so you're just..

So you relax your body?

Yeah. And then you become a dead weight.

Ah okay. So practically it feels quite hard to move you.

So the police have to drag you, they've got you underneath your shoulders, your arm pits, and they just have to pull you, and you're incredibly heavy.

Did this surprise the police, did the first few times it must have happened, they must have been like 'What are you all doing'?

Yes, and if they released you a little bit, then you just flopped back down again, and also women would be linking arms. Now I don't know, maybe I had the top of the range training in NVDA, or not, if such a thing exists, or I think we were kind of, sort of making it up as we went along. We knew that we weren't going to be violent or fighting back, or resisting arrest, because we knew that we probably would be arrested, and it was made quite clear, or we made it quite clear to each other - this is probably speaking about the Aberdeen contingent again, that arrest was very probable, and if you weren't wanting - nobody wants to be arrested - but if you wanted to avoid being arrested, that was absolutely fine. So it was really important that you take steps to not be in the position where you might be arrested. And there was no hierarchy amongst that, there was no 'Look at us, we're big and brave and tough, and we do't mind being arrested', it was just very clear that everybody was at different points in their lives. I mean if you're a mum you can't be arrested, if you're a

single parent you can't be arrested. Um if you're particular jobs, you can't be arrested. So I think our NVDA training was quite ad hoc...

Did yo train each other? How did you get trained?

Well I think um, do you know I can't even quite remember that. We may have done it in a group - I can't tell you who organised it, it wasn't me that organised it, um, we maybe spoke about it on the minibus going down. Had a chat at Southwaite Services. I honestly can't remember. Maybe people at the camp were speaking about it.

So it's much more of a collective oral, um, information swap?

Yes.

Rather than a formalised or a written...

Yes, and I think a lack of things being formalised was one of the huge aspects of it for me, and I, at the risk of sounding like an ancient, cynical, geriatric, you can sometimes hear about maybe other little protests that people are trying to do now - because people are much more frightened now, that's my sense - I might be wrong, and just a bit more fearful of breaking the rules, um, but can be very organised in terms of planning where their protest is going to be and how it's going to be run, but there was nothing like that. I mean, and yet hundreds and thousands or women all arrived in the same small corner of Berkshire. We didn't even have email. It was quite, quite incredible.

Yeah

Quite incredible.

Do you think part of the reason - because I have this theory that part of the reason there's this fear of breaking the rules kind of goes back to what you were saying that if someone models for you - this is what happens if you beak the rules, and this is the worst case scenario that happens when you've broken all the rules, and the world didn't end, and it was, it became apparent. If you don't know that - if no-one's modelling that for you - so my theory is it's harder to make those decisions and take those risks. Isn't it?

Yeah.

So I suppose my question is, is that partly why we don't remember Greenham in the same way? Do you think that partly it's quite a radical piece of history, and it's useful to obscure that in some ways?

Yes, I think that's true. I think it was very easy to ridicule Greenham at the time. I've always been interested in what the press does, and the press was shameful. The press is still shameful, but the press was shameful in the fact - occasionally we'd get dramatic photographs, like a million women embracing the base - that'd be a dramatic photograph, but in terms of the issues - it's just the same now, the press want the dramatic photograph, but the issues are 'That's a bit boring, nobody's interested in that - we want to see the dramatic pictures, or the dramatic headlines'. Um I remember the Daily Mail had a dramatic headline which went something like 'Woolly headed, woolly hatted, lentil eating lesbians', and I quite liked the alliteration in that, I thought that was quite a good headline. In terms of the truth, it wasn't technically wrong, I guess, maybe the 'wooly-headed' was a bit unfortunate, but everything else in it was true, I guess. But there was no discussion about the issues, but this was the 1980s, and we were in Mrs Thatcher time, um, and the mines were being shut down, and poll tax had come into Scotland to see if we liked it, which of-course we didn't. And it was a very oppressive anti-... just anti-humanity time, it was a very cruel time, I think. I've forgotten what your question was!

That's okay. Unusually for me I've remembered it! I suppose I was thinking why we don't, there doesn't seem to be a lot of national recognition of it. Whereas last year we had a lot of Suffrage - quite rightly, and Suffrage history, and even people that study politics say they don't come across Greenham doing that, which seems insane to me.

It's very interesting.

I wondered if that's in part deliberate, because it's such a dangerous thing to learn about in a way because it gives you...?

I think it is a dangerous thing to learn about. I think also the fact that it was such a nebulous, or it wasn't organisation, there wasn't a leader, there wasn't a website - partly because such things didn't exist anyway, but there wasn't one newsletter necessarily that was going out. So the press didn't know who to speak to. If they wanted to speak to somebody they would turn up at the gate and whoever was there would speak to them, and it might be a radical-lesbian-anarchist-pacifist-separatist, or it might be somebody who was wanting to stand for the Labour Party in the next council elections. It could be anybody, so they had such a wide range of, of, I guess soundbites coming at them - the press. And they would choose the most extreme as well - it's like in any photographs of a demonstration. Even today - the camera will go

onto the person who's got half a head of green hair and fifty thousand tattoos, they won't show the mass of ordinary - whatever that means - people who have also come on the demonstration, and you're already, you're othering it, you're making it something that isn't what ordinary people who are watching televisions would even consider going on. Um, it's quite interesting - a slight diversion, but in Scotland I am one of many, many people who would really like Scotland to be an independent country, and there are an awful lot of marches happening for independence. There isn't one person organising it.

Oh really?

But there's a sort of collective group of people who are organising it. I'm not involved in it, but I've been on a couple of the marches, and they're incredibly good humoured and they - they will get one photograph of a great extreme of blue and white flags going up the main drag in Edinburgh or wherever, um, and the issues don't really get discussed, and I'm seeing parallels, I think - I see parallels. So I think coming back to your question, I think the media has a lot to answer for, but I think in a sense as well, the way Greenham was organised, in inverted commas, didn't lend itself to its being clearly documented, um, it was - there was a sense that everyone just dispersed to all corners of the globe. That's what it felt like afterwards, I mean I know I've hardcore remained, but...

Does that mean it couldn't be reproduced do you think? Make it hard to replicate?

As a..

Could you imagine it now?

That's a very interesting question, a very interesting question. Can I imagine it now? I think it would be incredibly different, I think social media would completely transform it - it would be all over Facebook, and instant photographs of police brutality would spin around the world in three seconds, um, it's difficult to know what would happen now, I mean it's not that there aren't things that need to be challenged and protested about. I think that what's happened in the last 20+ years has trapped an awful lot of people into not feeling they can step out of their lives to do something about their planet. Even things like I was able to sign-on and go away for two or three weeks - you used to be able to sign-on and then take a holiday from signing-on, so you could miss signing-on for a fortnight, so you could go away for a month. Today you can't do that. You have to show that you have applied for seventeen jobs every three days, if you don't you get sanctioned, and then you lose your money, and then you lose your home - if you've got a home, so it was much easier. It was just coming to an end, I think - at the time we were going to Greenham, but it was easier to step

out. I was a student for a while, but I didn't have a student debt - you know we got a grant, we got our fees paid, it was easier to do something different. And then you would rent somewhere to live and you would get housing benefit, and nobody would say 'Oh get your foot on the property ladder, quick.' You know, people in their 20s have got mortgages, and I think a mortgage is one of the greatest tools of social control that there is. I resisted it myself until about 2 years ago, so guilty as charged! (Laughs).

It's impressive though because you know I've had one for quite a while, so.

And that's housing policy - so you could say that housing policy in the United Kingdom has dictated who is able to protest, because you can't rent affordable and securely, it is not an option anymore. But you're not here to discuss housing policy!

It's very interesting.

But everything is linked.

Exactly.

I think that's the point - it's all linked. One of the symbols of Greenham was the spider's web, and it's all linked. Welfare rights benefit systems, housing, it's all linked. Student debts - it's all linked.

And the power of protest, so that being an option as part of our human rights - that's not an accident. Like you say it has its own power and impact and that's really important. I was going to ask you what took you away from Greenham? After - when did you stop going eventually, what happened?

I think I partly got burnt out. I was living in Aberdeen and going up and down to Greenham. And back in Aberdeen a few of us were - we called ourselves Aberdeen Women for Peace, and we were producing newsletters and leafleting in Union Street - that's the main street in Aberdeen, um, and we were talking to councillors, to - we were trying to flag up Aberdeen city's anti-nuclear policies, and I think it was a Labour councillor - I can't remember the details of it now, but um, challenging councillors to - especially Labour councillors, because this was in the days when Labour was definitely anti-nuclear, um, to actually you know, act on their principles and to tell the people in Aberdeen what their plans were for if there should be some kind of nuclear disaster or nuclear attack, or and they had a nice wee bunker under the council buildings in Aberdeen, and then they had an early warning system, somewhere up a hill out in the countryside. And we organised things like - I think they organised a sponsored bike ride from the nuclear site in Aberdeenshire - which

is quite fun. And then we had another little peace camp, which the press came to - at another of the Aberdeenshire early warning systems, really just to publicise things that were going on.

So did you feel like your activism transferred more to a Carry Greenham Home model, rather than having to go to Greenham?

I think it did, yes. We were sort of straddling both, well the distance was silly, but I think I just got very tired. I think quite a few of us got very tired, and I retreated into what can only be described now - somebody else described it, not my phrase - a political domesticity. That might be the woman who wrote *Patience and Sarah*, or *Ladies of Llangollen*. Um.

That's a lovely phrase, though.

Lesbian literature lesson!

(Laughs).

And so yes, and then I became a vegetarian cook, that was why - armed with my degree in sociology I became a vegetarian cook and worked in a couple of different places. And then, but the links were still there.

I was going to say, what's the legacy of Greenham in your - the rest of your life?

I think, when I was at Greenham I met an awful lot of very incredible women, and one of the, of the incredible women I met was called Naomi Griffiths and she sadly died 2 years ago, but she and I were firm friends for...

It's a lovely name.

Yes, from then until two years ago when she died. And she took different things from Greenham, and she was based in Cumbria, in-fact. And she did various things, but she also went to Nicaragua and um, worked as a health educator there, and I went out with her on a couple of occasions. And so that all came from Greenham. And then having gone to Nicaragua twice and seen a whole other bit of the world, I then came. Back probably again, a bit traumatised and shell-shocked at the state of the world because it was obviously in the middle of the Sandinista America war um, and I came back and stayed in London in a squat and volunteered in a homeless hostel. You don't need my life story here.

No, it's all really useful.

But from that, that then became a job, and then that became another job, and then I had a job who said 'Why don't you get a qualification in this social care type work?' And I became a social worker, which is what I kind of am.

And all of that sounds like, you say it's definitely a path that Greenham set you on, in a sense?

Yes, Greenham, the people I met, the values I encountered and absorbed, I hope I had a lot of those values already, but I think they got crystalised. I've always been proud of when I apply for a job as a social worker, and I have to write down if I've got any criminal convictions, and I of-course say 'Yes I have'!

(Laughs).

I was at a lovely job interview, and my criminal convictions were on a piece of paper, and I had it with me, and the person interviewing me asked to see it, and I handed it over. And she said 'Ah, yes, me too!' And we just had - the whole job interview spun away, and we were just speaking about Greenham. It was lovely.

That's really lovely.

And that's just...the strands.

Yeah. How have you found, how did you find people's reactions to Greenham? Did your family and friends support you at the time?

Um...

Or did you come up against resistance from people you knew?

I think a mixture. My sister - slightly younger, she was at university as well, although she was ahead of me at university - she's younger than me, but I did things a wee bit later than usual. I think she was worried. She wasn't pro, she wasn't a Tory, she wasn't pro-nuclear in any way, but she was worried that this maybe wasn't the way to do things. She used to say, when I would come back to Aberdeen, having been at Greenham, and I would be just sort of gabble-y, or wanting to stop people in the street and say 'Don't you know what's happening? This is all awful', and of-course that isn't how you change people's mind. But as a very idealistic 20-something, I really did think that that was how sometimes you had to do things, but of course you don't. She would say I reminded her of a parrot in a cage and she just wanted to draw

a blanket over the cage, so I would still be in the blanket over a cage going 'bluuurrrghghghgh'.

That's interesting she, her metaphor wasn't to open the door and let the parrot back to the jungle, it was to quiet the parrot! Go back to sleep!

But she was lovely, and was very supportive in practical ways. My mum was amazing, she was very, she was a school teacher, primary school teacher, very conventional, quite, respectable looking person - tweed skirt, and flat shoes, and a nice handbag, and a sheepskin jacket, and she always incredibly supportive - she was just great. She actually fell out with her own sister over it for a few years - her own sister didn't speak to my mum because my mum supported me. And my mum had a CND badge that she wore on her jumper when she was teaching, and her head teacher asked her to remove it and she said 'No'. That was fine he didn't say anything else - he'd done his job and she'd said her bit, so that was fine. I will always have an abiding memory - she's not alive anymore - of her coming to a women only disco that we ran above a rather grotty pub in Aberdeen - full of punk-y types, lesbians, women. And my mum came - I don't think she stayed for the whole thing, but she came and I thought bravo, and so she was great and she was always very, very supportive.

Do you think that you, all the stuff that you represented and got from Greenham, but also as you say those values and that lifestyle yourself anyway - was that a bit of an eye-opener for your mum?

Oh absolutely. And she died um, she was 60, of leukemia, and she wrote us - myself and my sister a letter, before she died - to be opened after she had died. And one of the things she said in the letter was that she had learnt so many interesting things from the way I had lived my life, and I thought that was lovely.

Oh that is lovely.

That she wouldn't have encountered at all as a primary school teacher in the far north of Scotland. But she'd heard about Greenham, she went to a women only disco, who does that? And she learnt about Nicaragua, all these kinds of things. She met my friends and people that she wouldn't have otherwise met, so that was lovely.

I'm so glad she wrote that down for you, that's really lovely.

Really, really nice.

That's really, really nice. Um, I was thinking about the um, the other relationships while you were at the camp, and I was wondering what you get - the day to day

dynamics were, basically? Sort of, what day to day life was like, and what the day to day interactions with other women would have been like?

Day to day life was very um, well obviously I have to stress I didn't live there - it wasn't my home for months and years at a time. So even if I was there for two or three weeks, I was always dipping in. Um but quite a long dip - there weeks felt like quite a long dip, I guess. The dynamics ebbed and flowed, um, there were some fairly major clashes of opinion, um, there were some very well intentioned but not always successful at reaching collective decisions.

(Laughs). Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

(Laughs). Um, I don't know where I stand on collective decision making. I think there's occasionally a case for a benign dictator, but that's um, maybe not what I should be saying.

As someone who haven't - for people listening who perhaps haven't been in a collective decision making process, what's that like? What does it mean?

Well it means everyone is - it's like consensus decision making, you're trying to reach an agreement that everybody is comfortable with.

Through discussion?

Oh massive, it can go on for hours and hours and hours, and it can get incredibly heated. As I got older and learnt more, I was involved for a while with a Women's Aid Group, and they operated as a collective, which was good. And team meetings would be collective - tried to come to a collective decision, decisions. But they brought in an external facilitator, and I thought that was really good, and I thought that's sometimes that I wished Greenham had had. It was um, equality in its purest sense, but with human beings who inevitably brought themselves to it, and none of us had been brought up in equality in its purest sense. We were all products of where we had come from, and we often - I think everybody can, it's a real struggle actually, because I think people have to be incredibly skilled and self-aware to be able to function in that type of um, of meeting, um and inevitably people's voices will get a bit lost, and the louder, more confident voices will be heard more.

There are no leaders, but there are sort of louder talkers.

Absolutely, yes yes. And I think often we mirrored quite a lot of the inequalities in society, so there were class divides, sociologist speaking maybe - there were class divides, there were undoubtedly race divides, there were sexuality divides, even

within um these individual groups, if you like, there would be divides within these groups - so not all the lesbians agreed with each other, but when did they ever? And that could be seen as degrees of radicalism, maybe, so people would be taking a political stand to its purest, extremist form, and leave 98% of the rest of us behind, which didn't make our views any less valid, but it was it was heady stuff, it was heady stuff. It was very, very interesting. I think there were probably casualties as well. Um I think people did feel left out. Definitely class stuff going on that some people tried to address, but it's unresolvable. It's unresolvable at a societal level, it's not resolvable around the campfire when you're being zapped by the American airforce, and having your fire extinguished by local coppers.

Did they come round and do that?

Yes, and that was into the evictions that were constantly going on.

Oh yes, we'll talk about that in a moment, I'll come back to that.

So I remain, I'm afraid, not a huge fan of collective decision making. In theory I think it's fabulous, but I'm now 61 years old, and I look forward to seeing it working in practice before I depart this earth.

After a good long time, I hope. Did you ever feel there as any sense of infiltration in the groups? Because obviously it was nebulous, people come and go. Were there any agents of the state, or agent provocateurs?

That's very interesting as well. I was not, it wasn't in my consciousness at all at the time.

That anyone would do that sort of thing?

Yes. Or even that maybe it was complete naivety on my part, and probably on other people's parts as well, that that would even happen. And when it was shown fairly recently to have happened with environmental groups, which the police infiltrated for years, didn't they?

Yes they did.

Shocking. I thought at that time, when that first came to light, gosh did that happen at Greenham? I mean it would have had to have been a woman that had done it - a burly policeman coming along would have been quite obvious! And wouldn't have stayed long. So I don't know is the answer - I don't know if that happened or not. Um, quite how much information they would have got - it's almost like if they'd come in

they might have been thinking 'Oh we're going to find out what the long term plan is - we'll hack in' - of-course there was nothing to hack into. If they'd spoken to twenty people they'd have got twenty different plans, so maybe they wouldn't have thought maybe this wasn't something worth doing. I have no idea - but it would be very interesting to know if anybody has come out and said 'Yes I was an infiltrator'.

I was wondering whether - because you're right, a lot of Greenham women have said to me 'They wouldn't have found out anything, because we didn't have an overall plan like that'...

There's not a 5 year plan written down.

No, exactly.

Which was its strength.

But I wonder - I've been at meetings before, where someone with an agenda - not necessarily of the state, but whatever agenda, has deliberately made the meeting factious, has made it break down, and I wondered if there was anything, things - that would be anything you could do - to sew discontent, which is possible? Don't know if that helps?

I think Greenham was so big, it was big enough to contain lots and lots of disparate views and different groups.

That's nice.

Um, it also cared for people with mental health problems.

That's interesting. In what way?

I think Greenham was somewhere that some people felt was a safe place they could go to. Um, they perhaps didn't come with a huge anti-nuclear, well thought out feminist agenda, um, but it was a safe pace and there were - my subsequent training was mental health, and I can look back and I can identify specific individuals who were clearly what we would call not-well, but normal politics of metal health could be another study - women and mental health - and where it intersects with conformity and that sort of thing. So I think Greenham was a place where people who in another context might have - their behaviour, their views could be seen as problematic, were just able to be absorbed. Um, I hate the word tolerated, but I guess that's what it might have seemed like to some people. But certainly it could be - it wasn't always -

it could be a safe place for people, for women, who just wanted to be away from mainstream life for a little while.

And maybe whose behaviour wasn't so fair, rub along with society made it unsafe for them. Or society made it unsafe.

Yes, yes. And that wasn't universally the case. There were a couple of people there with severe mental health problems, and again polarised views would happen - some people were thinking 'This woman is clearly very ill, we maybe need to get her to a hospital', and somebody else would be saying 'She just needs a safe place - somewhere to speak and talk and be listened to', um, and it's not that straightforward either.

Interesting. I did hear - I don't know, you might not know anything about this at all, but I know some of the women who went to prison said that they, they - a woman that came out of prison sometimes had heard about Greenham from the Greenham women going to prison, and would then come to the camp. I don't know if you know anything about that? Maybe not?

I don't. Um, it doesn't surprise me at all, because I think Greenham politicised an awful lot of women. Um, and I was, at times, I was very aware that there were links being forged with the miners' wives, and um, that was - I thought that was really, really good, um, and I think a lot of, I think a lot of women just came to Greenham to see what it was about, and absorbed a lot of views and opinions and attitudes that maybe they hadn't come across before. Or had their own ideas validated, you know, which hadn't been allowed maybe, before.

Do you see where Greenham has influenced things now? Do you see where women might have - what affect it might have had?

I think, I don't know that I could generalise about that. I would doubt there was any woman who went to Greenham whose life wasn't affected by it. Um, I mean mine certainly was. I don't know what direction it would have gone in had I not gone to Greenham. Because it didn't particularly have a direction at the time, I don't think. Um, and I hope it's given a lot of people the sense that they can kind of do what they want. Um, you can just do what you want. I think that's really important for people to know. And it frightens me that so many people don't know that. I'm not practicing as a social worker at the moment - I haven't for two or three years, but I work with social work students, I work with different Scottish universities and students who are training to be social workers. And they're very young, and they've never heard of Greenham, and they're quite alarmed at the thought that somebody might go to prison for their belief. Now I don't sit down and say 'Hello, I'm Alison - your practice

teacher, I went to prison for my belief to them, but you're talking about values and you're talking about the state, and you're talking about the law, and you're talking about how far would you actually challenge something that you believed in? Which you do have to do as a social worker, and the levels of anxiety, and timidity I think, and I push them a little bit to see what occurs!

(Laughs).

But er, um.

Are you - how are you feeling, can I ask you a couple more things?

Yes, that's fine.

Good. So I wanted to just - I was thinking about you talking about the way Greenham could absorb differences of opinion because of its breadth, really, and its diversity and its - I was thinking about the different gates. Did you have much experience, because they all seem to have different personalities, did you always go to Yellow Gate, or did you move around?

I was mostly at Yellow Gate. I can't now remember the different themes - personalities is a good word for it, I think, the different personalities of the different gates.

Were you aware they had them, at the time?

Yes I was, I'm wondering, and digging into memory that isn't really there anymore, but there may have been one that didn't allow the boy children or something like that - one that was more extreme in its politics than the others. But I think Yellow Gate was quite, um, quite a mixture - it tended to be where people arrived. It tended to be where the press came, and because it was the main entrance to the base.

It was the most women there - someone described it to me as 'The city', like just in terms of numbers.

Right yes.

There were sort of more of them.

But I stayed at another couple of gates which I now can't remember - Blue, Green possibly, in a sort of less busy time - just sort of staying in a bender and listening to the birds singing, that kind of thing, as opposed to going out there and...

Doing actions. Did you go - you mentioned the evictions earlier, and I know that some women that were sort of, basically went to support the Greenham women because of the evictions. Did you go for any of that?

Not specifically to support, but I was evicted many times.

Oh really.

So I...

Can you talk us through what the process was then - of being evicted?

Well there was a very large what you call the bin lorry, which we call the muncher. The kind of lorry local authorities have for collecting rubbish, and they've got a great big scrunch-y thing at the back, and everything that goes into it just gets scrunched up. And I - the police, the local police would be there to support the council because it was the council carrying out the evictions. and they basically just took things like sleeping bags, and pulled the tents down and poked the benders apart and took stuff out. They were trying to clear the site - I mean that was their job, they were doing their job, they were trying to clear the site. Um, and my, I think my abiding memory of it is just the viciousness of it, and the petty cruelty of it, and the - they had a fire extinguisher and they would put the fire out. And I think fires are such symbolic things, aren't they? Again, you could do a whole project on the role of fire in women's lives.

In community, and in women's lives particularly.

And the fire would get put out. And immediately that they'd gone people would start getting the fire sorted out again, and there were stones around it - I mean it probably looked different every time you went, fires generally have stones around them - and they would kick the stones, and I thought you really hate us, 'Why do you really hate us?' So those were the evictions, and then they just left a scene of devastation and off they rumbled to the next gate I guess.

And this would happen several times a day sometimes, wouldn't it?

Yes it did. You would just get set up again and back they would come. Um I don't know what the rationale for it was, I don't know who was in control of it - well it was the council, but, er...

Was it a break the spirit sort of thing?

Sorry?

Was it a break the spirit sort of thing?

Yes, it was a very naive forlorn hope, but again I guess if you're in county hall Newbury, whatever, their main council buildings are called, that's all you've got really, isn't it 'We want rid of those women because they're spoiling the view, and making a mess, and being vegan, and flying their lesbians flags, and it's just not what we want in rural Berkshire, so let's get rid of them', and that was all they had really. All they had was aggression. I don't recall anybody from the council coming up and trying to negotiate or anything.

That's interesting.

Or, 'While you're here can we make your life any easier?' There was nothing like that...

Or even 'How can we induce you to leave, what would your deal be?'

Yes (laughs).

Just the end of patriarchy and climb down from all nuclear-weapons.

Yes, so yes, they were really quite shocking, and obviously then you see things on television about refugee camps and Calais, which is real. You know we largely had somewhere else to go, if your sleeping bag got destroyed somebody would bring another one, but it opened my eyes I think to what people have to go through, so yes. Something else I thought of but it slipped away.

If it comes back, just say.

Oh okay.

But I was thinking while you were talking about that, how uncreative Newbury council and the bailiffs - that whole thing of going to violence first - that thing Einstein says that 'Violence often cleared the way quickly, but it never proved itself creative'. And I thought how creative the Greenham women were - in complete opposite to that, it's all about well take away the violence and you have to be really creative, and what else do you do? And I was wondering, um, I suppose, if you saw Greenham made into a piece of art, or performance, or whatever, what form would you want that to take?

It would be very colourful. Lots of colour in it. It would have music in it. Um it would have lots of laughing in it. Um, and yes, it would have fun in it. And that might not have come out of anything I've been saying about arrests and prison and...

Where did the fun come into it?

I think the fun came into it at an absolute woman to woman level. So you sit down with a complete stranger who might be from, I don't know London, Holland, or she might have come from Alaska. And you just have a conversation. And it usually starts with 'Where have you come from?' And the next question was sometimes 'How long have you been here?' And that could be 20 minutes or 4 years. And just, I think because everybody was just here with a similar, but never identical purpose, um and awful lot of the rubbish that we talk about with - to people when we've just met didn't have to be engaged with. Um, and I think that was the main thing - just that the relationships that instantly formed and um...

And was music a big part of that? You mentioned song and music...

Yes the protest I associate with singing, and er, I, my partner at the time - a long time ago, had a fabulous singing voice, and she would come down, and she would just start singing, and then everybody else would start singing, and we were all singing these Greenham songs.

What sort of things?

The Greenham song - the old song 'You can't kill the spirit' echoed earlier, and some of them were traditional sort of American peace songs - Woodie Guthrie and all that sort of stuff.

Oh lovely.

So yes, lots of song um, and this probably isn't relevant either so you can take this out later on if you want, but the woman I knew who was my close friend for 20 - 30 years, 30+ years ago...

Naomi?

Naomi, at her absolutely fabulous humanist funeral, the Greenham quilt was there.

Oh!

And her coffin was resting on the Greenham. Quilt.

Oh please tell us about the Greenham quilt, what's that?

Well I don't know a lot about the Greenham quilt, but later I could tell you somebody who does, I could point you towards somebody who does.

Yeah. But a quilt was made. I wasn't involved in it at all.

Like a patchwork?

Yes. Lots of images and um just all sewn together like quilts are, and it's held somewhere in one of the Women's Archive-y places, possibly in London, I don't know. Um.

And is it in memoriam to the Greenham women, or the Greenham protest?

Yes, yes, I think it is. And it can be sort of loaned out for some people doing an exhibition, obviously it was loaned out for Naomi's funeral.

That's lovely.

She was a stalwart of Greenham. And so it was there, and then we went to a village hall for afterwards, and a wonderful mix of local people and Greenham women, and somebody from America, and Nicaragua, just all of her life was there. And somebody started singing a Greenham song, in this WRBS...what they're called in England, but you know the local, rural people's had laid on this wonderful event and spread after the funeral, so it was just this fabulous mix of local people and other people, and then a women called Rebecca - Rebecca Johnson started singing a Greenham song, and I thought that's lovely, and then I thought I wonder what Naomi would think - she'd probably be rolling her eyes and thinking 'No!' But er, yes, the Greenham quilt was lovely.

That's really lovely that that was there. So there's a question that we try and always end on I suppose, although I invite you to tell me anything else you want after this, but we always try to make sure - so I'm going to read this because we're trying to get this quite specific - the only specific one we do, it's - could you explain why you think it's important that Greenham is remembered by subsequent generations?

That's a very good question, isn't it. And I don't know that I have one tidy little answer.

That's okay, there is no time limit on your answer! (Laughs).

It's important because everyone, but particularly women, but everyone, has to understand that you can affect change in your world. And it's important because I think the world now in 2019 is in a desperately bad way. Um, I don't think wise people appear often enough to have their voices heard. I don't think wise people's voices are heard so much now, and they have to be. Um. And I would love young people to believe that they can step out of the terribly narrow tram lines that their lives get channelled into. And it doesn't matter what some influencer on Instagram says they should be wearing or doing to their nails this week, it doesn't matter, um, image doesn't matter - I guess. Um, to step away from that and to believe that you can influence and make a difference, but the stage before that is to see that a difference has to be made, because I think there's not much in the -mainstream media certainly - that even would suggest that there's that much wrong! In slightly smaller print - oh another rainforest has gone, or another war has started, or another tens of thousands of refugees have ended up somewhere where nobody wants them there either. Yes that's all there, but it doesn't seem to...

It's presented as inevitable as well isn't it.

Yes.

Rather than something you could actually work out why it's happened and do something about it.

Which is bizarre. It's the contradiction between suddenly everybody is so connected, but nobody is really touching each other. Everybody is - this interview could go round the world in two seconds if you wanted it to, um, but...

That's an amazing way of putting it.

And then in another 5 minutes time another one would have gone round the world with someone who speaks about, I don't know, why you should buy that vegan shampoo as opposed to that vegan shampoo. Everything is desperately important for four seconds, I think that's my sense. And then the next desperately important thing is desperately important for four seconds, and on it goes. And I think Greenham made time for people to speak to each other, and to explore their own idea, and to take their ideas back to their communities to do with what they would. I don't know if that's the answer to your question or not!

It's a lovely answer. So many amazing quotes in there. I could have made a lot of badges out of that answer! (Laughs).

Oh the badges - yes!

Yes! If you had just one or two memories of Greenham, what would they be, would badges be in there?

Badges would be there, yes. Used to...

'Cat Lovers Against the Bomb!'

Yes, that kind of thing - 'Well Meaning Guardian Readers Against the Bomb!'

That's good, I haven't seen that one!

Um, there were badges that used to make some of us quite annoyed. I remember being in Aberdeen and someone had a badge that said 'I'd rather be at Greenham', to which the only answer is 'Well why aren't you?' Take responsibility for your actions, please. Which was a little harsh. So yes, so that was fun. And I think the fire - sitting around the fire with a group of women that you'd never really met before. I always used to carry a pen knife with me, and I would just always be whittling tent pegs, before another muncher would come and take away - I would always be whittling tent pegs. I play the recorder and I met a woman who also played the recorder, and neither of us knew the same tunes or music, but we played our recorders together and it worked. So that was lovely. I remember that. Um, and I think just the scale of it, that's - the scale of it, which I've never seen ever since then, and probably won't. I mean I know a million people marched against Brexit, but a hundred thousand people marched for Scottish independence, but you have to go where the police let you, and that was a Mrs Thatcher law, and I think protests that I see now are really quite manicured - you have to get permission, you have to have stewards, and now thinking about that, can you imagine Greenham asking for permission! 'Well you have to have at-least one steward for every two hundred women, and they have to wear a high-vis jacket' it really just wouldn't happen would it. And 'You can only go here, and you can't go there - but not on a bank holiday', and that's how protests are nowadays, you have to get permission to march or to protest, and if there's too many of you in the wrong place there's a law against that as well. So people won't do it, and I think that's the difference - people won't do it, whereas we just did it, and that's the power.

Lovely. Is there anything that you were hoping I'd ask you, that I haven't, or that - you know, that you've thought of as we were going that I didn't follow up on?

I don't think so, I'm amazed that I've got so many things, so many lovely memories, and powerful memories to speak about. I was thinking I was only there for a short time overall, maybe I won't have anything to say about it...

But actually the impact - the quality of your memories as well, actually even down to the books you were taking to prison and things, it's great.

Yes, Doris Lessing - I didn't finish it! A longer sentence I'd have got through, but I finished it when I got home. But no, there's nothing that I'm left thinking, or that I wished you'd asked about that.

Good, um, Christine, our wonderful photographer here, was there anything that you wanted to.....it's been really fascinating, it's been lovely to talk to you, really wonderful.

You too.

Was there anything I missed that you wanted to throw in yourself?

Just a tiny little final aside.

Oh yeah.

I was arrested twice. One I told you about, five days in a police cell. But the other time I was arrested, was for obstruction and obviously found guilty of that by a Newbury magistrate. But I appealed that one, I appealed it at Reading Crown Court, and won the appeal. And again - the days of legal aid and a very, very good barrister called Geoffrey Binnedman/Bindman, um, which my little solicitor in Aberdeen had found. So I think in a small way we slightly radicalised this little solicitor in Aberdeen, who was at a small legal office selling houses and doing whatever else solicitors do, and I stumbled in smelling of woodsmoke saying 'I'd really like to appeal this charge'.

So what was the obstruction you were charged with? And why did you appeal it? What were your grounds for appeal?

I didn't think I was causing the obstruction, I felt nuclear weapons were causing the obstruction, and if that wasn't going to fly, then the police are causing far more of an obstruction than we were.

So what were you doing? Was it a sit down..

Yeah, we were sitting down in the road whilst they were driving the nuclear weapons through the gates.

And you managed to get, you managed to get yourself off that charge with those arguments?

Yes.

That's amazing...

It is amazing! So I thought we'd just put that down on the record.

Yeah! Can you tell us how, what the, how that was received, over - just a little bit more about how that went across, because that's amazing.

Well it was all quite unreal, um, and it was just - it was all, in a sense it was almost as if, I didn't really know what was happening, because I'm not a lawyer, um, and it was all just very technical legal arguments, I don't - I don't quite know how it was. But a few of us were driven - I think it was Naomi in-fact who drove us um, Reading Crown Court, and um, lots of legal people speaking to each other, and bits of paper were passed around with little maps on them and er, it was thrown out.

The judge basically couldn't prove that you were more of an obstruction than all of this other stuff?

Yeah, the obstruction that was taking place on that occasion was hundreds and hundreds of police people, hundreds and hundreds of Greenham women, and huge big articulated lorries driving very, very slowly nuclear weapons in USAF Greenham common. They couldn't pin the obstruction on me. That was quite nice!

That's lovely. Well congratulations on that.

Thank you very much.

That's really cool!

My finest legal moments.

Great, thank you so much.

Thank you.

It's been lovely to talk to you, really fantastic. I'm so proud that's in the archive, thank you.

It's great. It's lovely to talk about it actually.

Good.

And thank you very much.