

## Do Something Positive

*David Krieger is the founder and president of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, a leading anti-nuclear organization based in Santa Barbara, Calif. Jeff Farr, World Tribune associate editor, talked with him about nuclear disarmament and his life of activism after he gave a lecture at the 4th U.S.–Japan Youth Peace General Meeting, Aug. 17.*

**JF:** What things happened in your life to awaken you to your anti-nuclear mission?

**Krieger:** The first influence was visiting Hiroshima, Japan, when I was relatively young. I was 21 at the time, and I remember going to the museum [Hiroshima Atom Bomb Peace Memorial] and thinking: “This is what happened here. I have never understood completely the dimensions of what happened here.” That was a powerful awakening for me.

And then, when I came back from Japan, I found out I had been drafted into the army! Later, when I was called to active duty in the Vietnam War, I decided for myself that I couldn’t participate in that war, because I didn’t believe in it. I thought it was wrong for many reasons, and I was not willing to be a part of that war. As long as I was outside of the sphere of actually having to kill people or injure people, I could reluctantly participate in the military — actually, I didn’t fully realize that I had a choice in the matter. But at the point where they actually wanted me to go to Vietnam and be a platoon leader I said no.

So I ended up becoming a conscientious objector. Then, when the army didn’t agree with that, I ended up going to federal court.

Anyway, that whole experience of resisting and having the turmoil in myself of whether I should go along with what might have been the easier route, or do what I knew was right, set me on this course. In a way, my work for peace is still coming out of that experience of protesting war.

**JF:** During the Cold War years, it seems that young people had a greater awareness about disarmament. I’m wondering what steps you think we can take to increase young people’s awareness today.

**Krieger:** All in all, through the Cold War the problem seemed more evident and more fearful. Now, with the Cold War over, many people, adults included, think the problems have ended, when in some ways the situation may be more dangerous than ever because of nuclear weapons proliferating and getting away from arsenals where they are under control.

I think what needs to be done first is to raise awareness that people need to speak out on these issues, and I think most young people have a very superficial understanding of what nuclear weapons do. They’ve learned, they’ve been taught from their schooling and otherwise, that humans are capable of controlling these weapons and that the weapons can even maintain the peace. But there’s no logic to this in the long run.

With the Cold War over, who’s being defended, who’s being deterred? It doesn’t make sense. I think young people will respond to this logic if it’s presented to them.

And I think the story of Hiroshima needs to be part of young people’s awareness. We have the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles and the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. — there need to be places where people can go and learn the lessons of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, too.

One other point I would make is that even during the Cold War there was always a big

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difference between arms control and disarmament. What most of the people understood then was arms control, and it's only now that disarmament is something people are coming to understand.

Many of the elite in society only want to talk to each other — presidents want to talk to presidents, congressmen want to talk to congressmen. But they need to listen to the people. And the only way we're going to end the nuclear weapons era is by people all over the world speaking out and demanding this. I am convinced that the people have to lead.

Maybe the sunflower [symbol of a nuclear weapons-free world] can be a rallying symbol throughout the world because it's so simple: Sunflowers instead of missiles. The comparison of sunflowers to missiles is so stark and understandable; you don't have to be an expert in technicalities, you just have to know which you choose.

Going back to my other point for a moment, about having a place to remember Hiroshima: Maybe it's a project for the SGI that I recommend you think about, creating a kind of nuclear weapons museum that puts the people in the picture, that tells the story of what happened at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Because right now, as I understand it, the only place you can find this story is in Hiroshima — and maybe Nagasaki.

We should have a place in this country as well, as difficult as it would be to make. And there should be one in Europe and other places. I think these museums would be huge successes in terms of education. It's something I would love to see happen.

**JF:** I think young people generally feel peace is possible, but when they start thinking about the nitty gritty details, like really abolishing all nuclear weapons, stopping the production of them forever, it seems harder to believe that could happen.

**Krieger:** It's not so easy for old people to believe that could happen either! What would I say to that? I would say that you have to have a certain amount of faith. You must have a certain amount of hope that peace is possible. It really is an act of faith.

There's nothing that's being done by the leaders of the nuclear weapons states that is significant in moving in that direction yet. But my faith is that if the people speak loudly enough and make their voices heard this will change. It's such a simple thing to say we're committed to the future of this planet, we're committed to the future of the human species, and we're committed to carrying on civilization at the highest possible level.

Why shouldn't every young person want that? Why shouldn't every old person want that? We've got to change the way we think, and that change has to come primarily from young people.

One point I left out of my talk, which I regretted, so I'll tell you now, is that I admire Mr. Makiguchi and Mr. Toda for speaking out against militarism and militant nationalism — for not being willing to just “go along” with such militarism and for paying the price of going to jail for their convictions. That is an example that deserves the highest respect in my opinion.

I admire what they did because in a small way I experienced that, as I explained to you. I didn't go so far as going to jail, but I might have. It would have been my choice if the only other choice was fighting in Vietnam.

I think that society does a terrible thing to young people, particularly young men, when we train them to be soldiers. What that really means is that we train them to be cannon fodder. We train them to be the people who are in the front lines, who we send out to kill and be killed if there's a war.

I'd like to see one simple change in the way society approaches warfare. I'd like to see that when any country's leaders declare war, that they go first, that they go to the front

lines, that they go as the cannon fodder. I want the leaders out in front. I don't want them sitting home comfortably someplace, while the young people are dying.

During the Cold War, the Congress of the United States had the audacity to build a place inside a mountain where the leaders could go to be safe, to carry on the government, in the event of a nuclear exchange. They weren't even going to take their spouses and children! That's extraordinarily selfish.

It is a deranged mind that would come to the conclusion that Mutual Assured Destruction is a reasonable course of action. Somehow we've got to get back to the basic roots of compassion and demand compassion of our leaders — or get rid of these leaders and choose new ones.

I would like to see nuclear disarmament happen because we have only so long to live. Maybe we can't completely abolish war and do away with every weapon in our lifetime, but we can try to achieve nuclear disarmament. I think that as a species we could agree to abolish all weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. I think this is possible, and that hope drives me on.

I am particularly encouraged when I come to a meeting like today's SGI meeting and see young people who respond to this message in a positive way and who, I believe, will go out and do something about it that's positive. That gives me great hope.

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