

Conversations with Arnie Alpert, Part 1

*Interviews and compilation by Susan Bruce for AFSC-NH
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I did a series of Zoom interviews with Arnie Alpert in the spring, just before his official retirement. When we discussed what Arnie wanted to talk about, the very first thing he said was, “the Gestetner copy machine.”

I’d envisioned stories of the beginning of AFSC NH, of years working for social justice, bedeviling politicians, creative actions, and the like....so you can understand why I was a bit taken aback by hearing, “the Gestetner copy machine.” As it turns out, the story of copy machines is something of a metaphor for social justice work.

In the early years, AFSC-NH put out newsletters. This was before computers. Before we had phones with cameras in our pockets. It was quite a process.

ARNIE

For small organizations, nonprofits and others, the way in which we generated our printed material was by and large through the use of the mimeograph machine. (*The Gestetner*) This was a relatively primitive form of printing technology that used stencils. You could type directly [on to] ... a sheet, a thin sheet of plastic that you would feed into your typewriter. And the pounding of the keys would punch little holes in the stencil. And then you would run that over a roll, and ink would get pressed through and you would end up with words on a page. There was a next level up form of technology that was called an electro stencil. And if you had one of those, which we did not, you could take printed work or graphics, screen photos, or live drawings. Then you would run that through this electric stencil machine, and it would make a stencil, you could then go back and run on your mimeograph machine. There was this stuff that we called press type; you’d get it at the art supply store. It had different fonts of letters and different sizes and you would put it on and rub your pencil over it to make headlines.

The predecessor to the NH Citizens Alliance, which was called New Hampshire People's Alliance, had an office on North Main and they had they had an electric stencil machine. So I would go over there and prepare the stencil for newsletters and such, bring them back to the office, run them off the mimeograph machine. I would often bring them up to a retired senior volunteer group on the top floor of the Kennedy apartment building, and sit around with a bunch of elderly folks putting labels on newsletters and folding them and stapling them in order to get newsletters to go to the post office.”

It was a lot of work to put out a newsletter back then. It was really a commitment. And we did a lot of it. I think I thought that I was supposed to

put out a newsletter every month or something and I don't know that I did, but we put out a lot of newsletters. The newsletter was called Quaker Witness and it doesn't really exist anymore. We've pretty much stopped doing that type of newsletter. Instead, we communicate with people by email."

SUSAN

Note that Arnie wasn't sure, but he thought he was supposed to put out newsletters every month, so he honored that commitment, and it was a lot of work. As he said to me at one point, "this is what we do."

Arnie told me so many stories, more than I have room for here. Everyone is familiar with the story of the Martin Luther King Day holiday finally being adopted in NH, and the victory of repealing the death penalty has gotten a lot of coverage. For that reason, we talked about some of the work that AFSC NH was involved in over the years that wasn't always a big, noisy success.

ARNIE By the late 1980s, homelessness was becoming visible and common. Some type of organizing initiative called Housing Now was having a big demonstration in Washington, and it would include people who were homeless, but also people who cared about homelessness. And a woman in Manchester named Henrietta Charest, who was the executive director at New Horizons, announced that she wanted to organize, and I don't even know how I got plugged into that network. But I started going to those meetings. And what I learned very quickly was that there was already an infrastructure of very dedicated people, trying to give attention to the needs of people without housing, through shelters and soup kitchens and the like. And they knew a whole lot about housing and homelessness, and a lot more than me. What they didn't know how to do was how to organize demonstrations. How to get people to demonstrations. And how to get them back again. So, I ended up joining these meetings of New Hampshire Housing Now to help out basically with what I knew how to do.

SUSAN

I like this anecdote. Arnie was wise enough to know that they knew more about housing and homelessness than he did, so to be the most help he could be, he stuck to his area of expertise.

ARNIE

And one of the things that we did, in partnership with a private radio station in Concord, WKXL, the American Friends Service Committee organized the first sleepout at the State House. It was called Gimme Shelter. And this was organized both to publicize the problem of homelessness in New Hampshire, but also to raise money to help pay for buses, so that people who were poor or who were homeless would be able to afford to go down to this demonstration in Washington, that was the beginning of Gimme Shelter. The organizing of that after the Housing Now demonstration led to the creation of something called

the New Hampshire Coalition for the Homeless, which in one form or another has continued to exist.

SUSAN

We talked about the Bird Dog project.

ARNIE

This was the first year (2003/2004) that we tried to track where the candidates were and created a website so that people could find out where the candidates were going to be, something that is an essential ingredient. And that was the year that we developed our training program. This started at a conference called Democracy in Action. That was held at what is now Southern New Hampshire University. I think it might have still been New Hampshire College at that time. And it was co-sponsored with some other groups probably with New Hampshire Peace Action. We were giving particular attention that year to three areas: trade policy, nuclear weapons, and affordable housing. We were interested in getting people who cared about those issues to be out there interacting with candidates. The conference started with a plenary session in the auditorium, with the other Arnie as our keynote speaker. (*Arnie Arneson*)

After Arnie gave her pep talk, I got up and announced that we had a presidential candidate who had come to speak to us.

Mike Prokosch was working with a Boston group called United for a Fair Economy. He was a tall, white guy looking sort of senatorial with slightly graying patches on the side of his neatly trimmed hair. Mike played the candidate.

He was perfect. He came in, shakes hands and waves and gets up and gives this vacuous speech and takes a couple of questions.

The only thing I really remember is that somebody stormed out of the meeting very upset because we hadn't invited Howard Dean to come. That was how well it worked.

Then we had a breakout workshop, where we talked about what did we learn from this experience. And from that point, I started to do those workshops that were based on role play, with the town hall meeting and the fake candidate, as the main exercise. Training in participatory action and experiential learning, rather than just explaining to people, this is how you do it.

SUSAN

One more story. We talked about the songs and plays Arnie has written over the years.

ARNIE

(Speaking about one of the songs in a play that was set during the Regan years)
My favorite was 'Deregulation' to the tune of 'The Locomotion.' It went something like, 'here's a little strategy I'd like to share now. Come on, baby. Do deregulation. A little selfishness and some laissez-faire now. Come on, baby do deregulations. The days of FDR are dead and gone, a new philosophy has come along, so come on come on do deregulation with me.'

SUSAN

I'm impressed! It's not everybody that could squeeze laissez-faire into song lyrics.

ARNIE

Actually, one of my best songs, Susan, was a song about expanded Medicaid. The song was 'Down by the Senate side.'

'We're gonna pass the Health Protection Act, down by the Senate side, pass health care for all ... we're gonna maintain severability, down by the Senate side.'

So, I got severability into the lyrics of a song which we sang outside the Senate chambers as they were preparing to vote on the bill. And one of the things I liked about that song is that we were talking in the chorus about when we're going to pass health care for all which was of course a step beyond what they were talking about. I think our approach sometimes to conventional lobbying has to be to support kind of whatever is the best deal that's possible in the moment, like raising the minimum wage to \$12. But also continuing to try to push for something that goes beyond what's not politically possible right now. What we're doing now has to be done in order to make things possible later on that right now just aren't possible."

SUSAN

I'm always amazed by Arnie's optimism. We talked about that, too:

ARNIE

Cynicism is not an irrational response to a lot of what we see going on in the world. But looking at these other glimmers of light that do exist, that in the bleakest of times, everywhere there are people who are doing amazing stuff, who can see somehow through the bleakness to what life could be like, and those are the stories and the people that I think we want to focus on, and use that to light up our own paths for the future. Sometimes things look bleak and sometimes things look brighter, but we're going to continue to organize.

SUSAN

Amen. Thank you, Arnie Alpert.

(Note from Susan – This is a tiny portion of what Arnie and I spoke of, and so much is left out. I chose to relate stories he told me that were meaningful in the context of organizing and continuing the good fight. Essentially, I told the story of how he prepared us for his retirement.)