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By Every chance to really make a difference By DANIEL STURM Before boarding the bus to Washington, I'd heard news that the Pentagon was ordering more than 150,000 troops to the Persian Gulf. Given the turmoil over the possible attack, I wasn't quite sure what January 22, 2003 Publication: Lansing City Pulse (MI) Word Count: 1684

Every chance to really make a difference

By DANIEL STURM

Before boarding the bus to Washington, I'd heard news that the Pentagon was ordering more than 150,000 troops to the Persian Gulf. Given the turmoil over the possible attack, I wasn't quite sure what to expect at the largest peace demonstration since Vietnam. In Europe, where I'd worked as a reporter for quite a few years, I'd seen mass demonstrations with burning cars, police using tear gas on environmental activists, neo-Nazis, and neo Communists. But what would happen in D.C.?

I decided to participate in the non-violence training workshop held at the Peace Education Center in East Lansing the day before our departure. About 50 participants, most on their way to D.C., but some planning to demonstrate in Lansing, played role games in non-violent resistance and practiced what they'd say, should a journalist ask them what they're doing. "The peace movement's success largely depends on how much noise we make. We have every chance to really make a difference," said Anabel Dwyer, an adjunct professor in humanitarian law at Lansing's Cooley Law School. Dwyer, who's a long-time peace activist, also told participants they were taking a risk by rallying this weekend. "Under the U.S.A. Patriot Act or the Homeland Security Act, you could already be considered terrorists. The people now in power are exactly those who were in power in the 1980s, in a tradition going back to the people who dropped our nuclear weapons."

Three buses from the Greater Lansing Network Against War in Iraq and four vans from the Xicano Development Center joined 500,000 demonstrators in Washington. A large number of Michigan State University and Lansing Community College students also traveled to Washington in car pools. They joined the nationwide weekend protest called by International A.N.S.W.E.R, which stands for Act Now to Stop War and End Racism. The Saturday rally referred to as "pre-emptive" peace rally was timed to precede the Jan. 27 deadline for the first major weapons inspection report to the U.N. Security Council. It has been viewed by some Bush administration officials as the date for a decision on whether Iraq's cooperation has been sufficient to head off a military strike. Other major peace events took place in San Francisco and Portland, Ore., but also overseas in cities like Tokyo, Paris, Cairo, and Moscow. And back at home, 900 gathered in protest at Michigan's Capitol in Lansing.

In another development, Rep. Mike Rogers (R-Lansing) received petitions from 759 people to let the sanctions work. The petitions were collected by Moveon.org, a antiwar Internet movement. He also met in his Lansing office with about 40 opponents of war. Nationally, an estimated 9,000 people met with senators and representatives. "This may be the largest coordinated 'in-district' lobbying day in our country's history," Moveon's Web site stated.

On the 12-hour bus trip to Washington over the weekend, there was plenty of time to discuss peace and war. Deanna Hurlbert, a state health educator, said there was no doubt that this war is unnecessary. "I feel AIDS is a greater threat to global instability, poverty, violence and terrorism than Saddam Hussein is. I think there should be efforts to invest elsewhere." Hurlbert said she personally favored the two slogans: "The axis of evil runs right through Washington" and "AIDS is a greater threat to international security than Saddam Hussein."

Reed Dornan, a professor of American literature at Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, said it was in the Bush administration's favor to keep people in fear of Hussein. "After Sept. 11, I tried to explain to my students that America wasn't very liked across the world, and that we should do something about this. They were so angry with me that I spent an entire semester overcoming the antagonism. Two students, who turned out to be in the Army reserve, were sort of the ring leaders. They made my life hell in this class." Reed told students about being in Berlin when the wall was built in 1961. "I told them it always looks worse right at the beginning of something like this than it does later on. So just relax. They thought I'm in the stratosphere, because I wasn't relating to the world as they see it."

The linguist and anti-war activist Noam Chomsky had mentioned the fear factor Dornan spoke of: "Everybody hates him [Saddam Hussein] and Iraqis are undoubtedly afraid of him, but outside of Iraq and the United States, no one's afraid of him. Not Kuwait, not Iran, not Israel, not Europe." Chomsky writes that creating fear through warmongering was an old tactic in the United States: "These guys now in office, remember they're almost entirely from the 1980s. They've been through it already and they know exactly how to play the game. Right through the 1980s they periodically had campaigns to terrify the population."

We stepped off the bus near the rally's starting point at the National Mall and stepped inside behind the banner: "Michigan against the War." Protesters from Lansing then walked to the opening rally on the west side of the Capitol Building.

Hurlbert said her primary goal was "to be recognized by mass media, and make such a presence that even the president's handlers won't be able to shield him from the reality of people speaking out against this war." And Melissa Hasvrouk, a Ph.D. student in English at Michigan State University, added: "We're glad to be here in solidarity. It's also a very serious situation, with many lives at stake. I hope the Administration realizes that the surveys they're doing aren't accurate, and that quite a few Americans aren't supportive of taking military action against Iraq."

The British band Chumbawamba opened the Washington demonstration with a performance of a new antiwar song. The swelling crowd seemed to not care about the winter winds, because of the blue sky and bright sun. People carried signs and banners, reading "No war with Iraq," "Drop Bush, not bombs," "Impeach the moron," "No war in Iraq," "Money for jobs, not war," and "No Blood for Oil." One center of attraction was a young man in a bathing suit who let people write their favorite peace slogan or symbol with body paint right on his skin.

Members of the Gray Panthers, Code Pink, Black Voices for Peace, the Green Party, the Muslim Student Association, Pastors for Peace and Global Exchange. They rallied the crowd for two hours from the stage, before opening the microphone to celebrity speakers. Among them were the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the Rev. Al Sharpton, the actress Jessica Lange ("Tootsie"), and the Vietnam veteran and antiwar activist Ron Kovic.

Lansing protesters drew great attention for their mural "Collateral Damage," which they carried from the National Mall to the Washington Navy Yard, about two miles away. The mural, which depicts Iraqi citizens against a background of newspaper headlines, was constructed by members of Greater Lansing Youth for Peace and Justice, a group of 19 junior and senior high school students. The students' mural was highlighted in a BBC News report on the D.C. protest.

Adam Seneska, a fourth-year English major at Michigan State and a member of Students for Peace and Justice, said he felt glad to be in Washington: "This is a crucial time, and it's good to know that there are several 100,000 people that feel the same way. The administration wants to keep this as low key as possible, and they don't want any media. But this demo gains momentum for the anti-war movement." Tim Heuer, an MSU graduate in religious studies and history, added: "I don't think the rally will directly change their war plans, but it can change the perception in the public. People see this stuff on TV, and maybe realize they don't know what's going on, and then they start reading."

In the meantime in Lansing, a Solidarity Peace Walk drew the attention of more than 900 residents. D.C. protesters called home to Bob Alexander, co-organizer of the Lansing rally, to see how things were going: "It's a great success," Alexander told them on the phone.

He said the Ingham County Democratic Party unanimously passed a resolution against the war. "Now we're trying to ask Lansing, East Lansing, various townships, school boards, churches, union groups, to do the same thing."

In Washington, Lansing resident Ellie Kennedy, a Gulf War veteran in early retirement, was marching. Following military duty in Saudi Arabia in 1990 Kennedy contracted the undiagnosed neurological disorder 'Gulf War Syndrome,' for which she's today still being treated. "There are many possible reasons for the disease: Maybe it was the chemicals dispersed in the environment, the oil well fires, or the drugs used for the first time in history on a massive scale as antidotes for a possible herb-agent attack." After being sick for a long time, Kennedy decided to become a strong war opponent. It was a decision she made while undergoing war trauma treatment in California. "In the last week of treatment we had to address the group what we wanted our lives to be about, and I said that I wanted mine to be about peace."

Chomsky has frequently compared the current peace movement with the anti-Vietnam War movement. "This time there's protest before the war has even gotten started. I can't think of an example in the entire history of Europe and the United States, when there was ever protest of any substantial level before a war. It's just phenomenal."

Lansing protesters spoke of feeling reassured of their pacifist opinions by the masses of people who were marching. Irene A. Mascola, a technical trainer and business owner of Bytesize technology in Lansing, said she lost her first fiancé in Vietnam. She sat recently at the coffee table with her 25-year-old son and thought "how young all my friends were who went to Vietnam. They were killing young people and families, and it messed up everyone's lives." Mascola said she'd hoped she would never have to take part in something like that again. "We have to live in peace! It takes so much more energy to be mean, and so much less to be kind and loving."

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