

## Oberlin Six

### *Praying, Reflecting, Planning, and Acting in Behalf of Justice and Peace*

#### *Introduction*

*This 2002 story is shared by Ardeth Platte, OP, a long-time justice and peace activist. She and other Jonah House members were (and continue to be) very inspired by the, then, six Oberlin College students and graduates who put their faith into action in behalf of justice and peace.*

*Ardeth shared this story as a testament not only to these inspiring young women but also to all college students who draw on their faith, skills, creativity, and youthful energy to help build a better world for all.*

#### **Beginnings — Peace Community Formed**

Spirited with a sense of righteousness and with compassion for the people of the world, a small group of women have set themselves on a path of prayer, reflection, and planning, followed by direct action in behalf of justice and peace. Taking on a new identifying name according to the struggle of the moment, they appear at the right time in the right place — united with each other by physical presence when possible or spiritual presence across the miles when separated.

Their struggle is consistent. Their courage is inspiring. Their commitment to speak out through direct action results in arrests, court proceedings, and consequences that counter the culture of this day.

We, at Jonah House, lift them up, in this writing, as representative of a generation of believers, young people, who are willing to travel to

nations affected by United States foreign policies — mainly the “developing” world. They listen to the new people in their lives, hear their plight and come back to the United States to do something about the practices and policies that cause so much suffering. Together at Oberlin College, their intense journeys connected and united with the formation of a peace community.



*Plan Colombia protest:  
Becky Johnson  
(left) and Kate  
Berrigan (right).*

#### **Personal Stories**

**Rebecca (Becky) Johnson** is a graduate of Oberlin College. She has worked for [Greenpeace](#) and [SOA Watch](#) since graduation and

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is presently considering and applying for seminary study. Becky has a strong faith in nonviolence and social action and has taken her inspiration from other conscientious people whom she has observed and studied.

**Laurel Paget-Seekins** graduated from Oberlin with a degree in Mathematics and Liberation Struggles studies. She draws inspiration from her mother who taught her activism and nonviolence as a way of life. Laurel is inspired further by the elders in the peace and social justice movements. She hopes to bring a fresh look and new insights to the work for justice in the future.

**Sarah Bania-Dobyns** graduated from Oberlin with a degree in History and a minor in Politics. She concentrated much of her time at college with [Peace Activists League](#) and [Global Trade Watch](#) in organizing groups of students attending SOA, [IMF/World Bank](#), and [FTAA](#) protests. Sarah is inspired by the strength of nonviolence, making history, and telling stories.

**Jackie Downing** finished her Latin American History Major, spent her summer months organizing, doing actions, and spending

time in South America. While in college she traveled to Colombia and interned with the [Colombia Support Network](#). She has educated many people regarding the role of the United States government in Colombia through various forums.

**Sarah Ruth Saunders** will finish her undergraduate studies after one more year at Oberlin, majoring in Peace and Conflict Studies and Women's Studies. She has spent time in Guatemala and interned at [Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance](#) in Tennessee. In high school she became part of the movement when she started a gay-straight alliance. She has been inspired by the courageous people who have come before her in the struggle for social and political change. Sarah works for a world of peace, beauty, and justice for all people.

**Kate Berrigan** completes her Community and Critical Resistance Studies at Oberlin this year. She grew up, the child of activists ([Liz McAlister](#) and [Phil Berrigan](#)), at the Jonah House community in Baltimore. She has found many role models in the international anti-war and disarmament movement over the years. Kate has strengthened her convictions since entering college, working in areas such as economic justice, human rights, and anti-oppression. She is inspired by natural beauty and people's love for one another and hopes to spend her life working to increase both.

### Actions and Arrests

This peace community had many occasions to come together for action in their college town, Oberlin, Ohio. When a speaker needed a response or a business needed to be boycotted, they acted, including:

**Plan Colombia Protests**— These students came together to [analyze Plan Colombia](#) and to give testimony to all that was happening "in our names." On April 2, 2001, the Oberlin Six prevented the first day of a [Sikorsky](#) Corporation suppliers conference by locking themselves together around a pillar in the gathering space. These six women were there to speak about the \$221 million sale of 30 Blackhawk helicopters by the United States for use by the Colombian army; they had an opportunity to speak with Sikorski officials, police, and persons preparing the conference buffet. Their actions resulted in arrest and charges.

During the trial, they shared their passion for the people of Colombia and the [human costs](#) of United States military aid. After a three day jury trial in which they defended themselves against the



*Plan Colombia protest:  
Laurel Paget-Seekins.*

charge of unlawful entry, they were found guilty and fined \$75.

Through their preparation for and participation in their trial, they inspired all who surrounded them and those who supported them. Their commitment to the future was evidenced in their statement, "We are young people who have a vision of peace and justice for the world, and we will continue to work for this vision."

**SOA Actions**— It was no surprise that, during her senior year, Becky Johnson spent 31 days in a fast, prayer, and dialogue at the gates of Fort Benning's School of the Americas (SOA) [as commonly known after being renamed

the [Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation](#) in 2001] in Columbus, Georgia. At this school, Latin American soldiers are trained in torture and military tactics that will be used within their own countries when they return. After sentencing of arrestees, Becky proceeded to the gates



A protest against the drug war in Colombia.

of Fort Benning, closed the gates, placed a bicycle lock around her neck and the gates, keeping them locked for three hours, a testimony to her strong convictions.

**Holy Innocents Action**— Kate, who was a practitioner in civil disobedience as a child and arrested as a minor, joined a couple of others to banner at the Pentagon for Holy Innocents, 2000. The case did not come to court.

**Y-12 Plant Protest**— On January 1, 2002, Kate, Becky, Sarah Saunders, and Laurel walked with others to the Y 12 plant, a nuclear weapons facility in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and were arrested. They were fined \$50.

**Rainbow Revolutionaries' Action**— On April 22, 2002 (during a weekend wherein thousands travelled to Washington, DC, to demonstrate and speak out regarding the key issues of war, covert action, interventions, and militarism in all of its forms), Kate, Sarah, Jackie, and Becky again took to the streets toward the Capitol to join the Co-



*Plan Colombia protest at Sikorsky: Sarah Bania Dobyns is bending over, Jackie Downing is on left, and Sarah Saunders is on right.*

lombia Mobilization Action. Calling themselves the Rainbow Revolutionaries, they formed a blockade and pursued their quest for the U.S. to get out of Colombia with its war-making support. They were arrested and called to court with four others.

This six-day trial of peacemakers looked like a group of professionals before the powers. They spoke with an expertise and eloquence that stunned the judge and jury. Finally the judge declared a mistrial, as the jury could not come

to a unanimous verdict. When the charges against them were dropped in October 2002 without a new trial, the Rainbow Revolutionaries declared victory.

### **Ongoing Commitment for a Better World**

Their work continues, together or with others, in gatherings from across the world. These young women seem determined to participate in nonviolent direct action as they explore all ways and means of being involved: direct action strategies (with the [Ruckus Society](#)) of climbing, hanging banners, forming blockades, and so on. They delve into the depths of the issues of the day. When on campus, they belong to the Vegetarian Cooperative and continue to examine all connections in the web of life.

It is with gratitude that we pray for wisdom, courage, and fidelity for each of the Oberlin Six for the long haul. To each of you we say “thanks.” You make the world better because you are in it, love it, and care for it.

“Oberlin 6” shared by Ardeth Platte, OP — who is also featured as an *inspirational person* on *Hill Connections*.  
Photos: thanks to Jonah House.