

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

"Save Our Valley" Organization

"Save Our Valley" Campaign Experience

O.H. 179

MARSHA E. PESKIN

Interviewed

by

Philip Bracy

on

April 7, 1981

MARSHA E. PESKIN

Marsha E. Peskin was born in Youngstown, Ohio on March 9, 1949, the daughter of James and Ann McGarry. She graduated from North High School in Youngstown and attended Youngstown State University from 1962 until 1962 majoring in history. Marsha was employed from June of 1974 until December of 1976 by the Tribune Review of Greensburg, Pennsylvania, and from March of 1978 until May of 1979 by the Ecumenical Coalition. She is married to Dale Peskin and they have one child.

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INTERVIEWEE: MARSHA E. PESKIN

INTERVIEWER: Philip Bracy

SUBJECT: Organization of campaign, personnel, her  
relationship to Coalition, events of  
February of 1978 through May of 1979

DATE: April 7, 1981

B: This is an interview with Marsha Peskin for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program concerning the Save Our Valley Campaign as part of the Ecumenical Coalition by Philip Bracy at Marsha Peskin's home on April 7, 1981 at 1:30 p.m.

P: This is Marsha Peskin. I was born and raised in Youngstown. I'm 32 years old. I've spent 29 years in Youngstown. I went to North High School, a school which is no longer in existence, and attended YSU. I majored in history. I'm only nine hours short of a degree. I know you're going to say, "Go back and get it." I will someday. I'm just tired of hearing it.

I got involved with the Coalition through John Greenman, a friend and neighbor. I don't know how he got involved with it, but he just called me and said they needed someone to act as office manager. That's the first position I had there.

B: That was approximately at what time?

P: That was March of 1978, I think.

B: How did you first find out about the shutdown itself? Do you recall it?

P: Radio.

B: You did?

- P: Yes, I remember hearing it on the radio.
- B: Okay, that would be March of 1978 you were first involved?
- P: Yes.
- B: What duties did you perform in the Save Our Valley Campaign?
- P: Save Our Valley Campaign was really just a small part of it. A lot of people think the Ecumenical Coalition was just something called Save Our Valley. Those were just the savings accounts. Now, do you want to know what I had to do with that or what I had to do with the whole thing.
- B: Well, let's start with the Save Our Valley and move into the general. Like what exactly was the Save Our Valley Campaign?
- P: That was an idea dreamed up by Dick Fernandez, the campaign coordinator. He's from Philadelphia. I don't know if you had a chance to speak to him yet. He thought that this was a tangible way that the people could show their faith in the steel mills and in Youngstown. The idea behind it was that people would open savings accounts in any of a number of banks. I don't even know what it is now, fourteen or twenty banks. At some time in the future, even though we weren't allowed to say this according to banking regulations, the hope was that if there was ever a worker buyout of the plant, that we would be able to persuade at least some of these people to use these savings accounts to purchase stock. But that was way down the line. That was something we hardly ever talked about, because we really had to play it one day at a time.
- So really, the idea was just for the community, not just the community, but we got savings accounts from people all over the country. This was just their way of showing us that they had faith in the Valley. So, we went to all of the banks and they all cooperated, some more than others. The money started to come in slowly at first.
- I know we had some television ads and some radio ads. I'm trying to think of how we . . . I think we even had telephone campaigns. I remember telling you when you called me, it all seems like it happened ten or fif-

teen years ago; and it does, to me. Things that I thought I would never forget, now it seems like they were fifty years ago. But, we had telephone campaigns. We had callers, volunteers calling up names. We purchased a computer list of names.

B: For Mahoning County or the City of Youngstown?

P: It was the Mahoning County. We didn't want to make any long distance calls. So, that ruled out Warren and Niles. It was Austintown, Canfield, Struthers, Poland, the area around here.

I was the one who called the banks every two weeks, all of the banks every two weeks, and they gave me their figures. Then, I don't know if it was every two weeks or once a month, John Greenman would have a press conference and release the figures. I don't even remember what the total was. I think it was around \$1,000,000.

B: What was the structure of the campaign staff itself, not the Coalition, but for instance . . . ?

P: You mean the office staff?

B: Right.

P: There were very few of us that worked there at the time. There was Dick Fernandez. Are you talking paid staff now? You're not talking about the unpaid ministers that made up the Coalition?

B: Yes, the so-called flow chart, within just Save Our Valley, not the Executive Committee and the Steering Committee in the Coalition.

P: Okay, not the Steering Committee. Okay, then basically you're talking about the paid staff. Dick Fernandez was the Campaign Coordinator at that time. He was, in other words, the boss of the office. He is a minister from Philadelphia. The second in command would have been John Greenman, who was the Publicity Director, although that wasn't his title, that wasn't what they called it. Jackie Alfred was there. Oh, Jackie Alfred was supposed to organize what they called the Committee of One Hundred. Are You familiar with that at all?

B: I've read some reference.

P: That was something that didn't work out well at all. I think it was probably for a number of reasons. I was not too familiar with the committee and the pro-

blems that she encountered, because that was something she did all on her own. She didn't require very much of my help. But, Jackie tried to organize a group of influential, well-known, not necessarily powerful, community leaders on all levels from bankers maybe all the way down to--not meaning down in terms--union people.

Their job was also to get the community rallying behind the whole campaign. The whole Committee of One Hundred idea didn't work. As I said, maybe if you talk to Jackie she can tell you why. So, Jackie was the third member on staff.

I was hired as an office manager. Ellen Robinson was there. Her title was secretary or something, I'm not even sure at the time, because after a while we all had different titles. There was also a crossover of people always willing to help someone else do their work. There was a secretary named Celeste Jones, who has since moved to Virginia. I guess that's all. I'm trying to visualize the office. I think, at the beginning, that was the whole paid staff.

B: Your office was where?

P: 263 West Federal Street in the "high bum district," a colorful area.

B: How were you first involved with the Ecumenical Coalition? How was your transition from being involved with them to the Save Our Valley Campaign? You mentioned your role was broader than just the Save Our Valley Campaign?

P: The Save Our Valley Campaign was a small aspect of the Coalition. When I was hired, I don't remember what my title was, but that was just one chore that I had to do. I never really regarded that as some big separate function. I mean, that was just something I did on Tuesdays or Thursdays. I mean, I did other things on other days. It wasn't as if I was singled out. They just said, "Marsha, call the banks every two weeks and find out this and that." So, really somebody just told me to do it.

B: The Save Our Valley Campaign was responsible to the Steering Committee or the Coalition or was there . . . ? I'm trying to trace the line of authority as far as it's related.

P: The Save Our Valley Campaign didn't have a separate staff or anything, if that's what you mean.

When we did send out mailings asking either for Save Our Valley savings accounts or for funds for the Coalition, we never really geared it toward religious people or lay people, except this one Methodist thing. That was just because Don Walton was apparently behind it. That was pretty successful. They were very generous.

B: Do you remember, was there a specific meeting it was targeted at? Was there a hierarchical meeting out of town or something that that was geared toward?

P: Well, I don't know if there was. If there had been, I would not have been part of it. But there must have been because it was a state-wide campaign. I don't think that Don Walton would have been appealing for funds to people in Cincinnati and Toledo unless he had discussed it. But that was something that I wouldn't have known.

B: What I was referring to was, I know at times there were meetings like in New York and other places where an appeal was made for funds. I was wondering if perhaps that was somehow tied into one of those efforts?

P: I doubt that it ever got that far. I don't think this particular one was that big.

B: How many offices did you have? Were they just limited to Youngstown or did you have several satellite offices?

P: Oh yes, we have state-wide organizations. We had an office in Cleveland, Toledo, Columbus, Cincinnati, Dayton. I know there was an effort to get one started in Steubenville. That fell through. That's only five. I think there was another one.

B: Do you recall who headed those? Was it just like a one person?

P: Yes, it was. It was just a one person.

B: Who are those people?

P: If I had thought of it before you came I would have looked for my little phone book, which I probably still have. I could probably remember some of them. Cleveland was Phyllis Mucha. Almost all of these people operated out of either large churches or diocesan offices or something free of charge. Toledo was Lola Glover. Columbus was Wiggins or something, a strange name. Cincinnati was . . . You should have told me yesterday you were going to ask me these names.

If you have to have them, I can get them. I think I have them in my phone book.

I found a list of the state office staff. Akron was represented by Pat Selwood. Karen Stenson was the Cincinnati representative. Phyllis Mucha was from Cleveland. Jim Wiggin was our Columbus representative. The Reverend Richard Riter was our first Dayton representative. After a while he quit--I don't even remember why--and was replaced by Carolyn Moiks. Our Toledo representative was Lola Glover. That's six. That's the whole staff.

B: At one point in the Save Our Valley Campaign, you moved onto a national scale. Could you kind of fill us in as to who moved where and what the strategy was then?

P: Do you mean who's idea was it?

B: Yes, basically who's idea was it and who made the physical move, who went where?

P: At that point, that was fairly early after I started with the Coalition. At that point, I was not attending the Steering Committee meetings, which I did later in my employment. At that point, I was not going to Steering Committee meetings. So, I would have to guess that everyone on the Steering Committee, probably not the Executive Committee, but everyone on the Steering Committee probably went to their own denominations on a national level and appealed for funds.

It certainly wouldn't do much good for Dick Fernandez to go to the Catholic Diocese. I know he did have a lot of Jewish friends in high places that he may have contacted. But, I'm just assuming that every member of the Steering Committee approached their own denomination.

B: What I was referring to: Wasn't there a point where Reverend Fernandez moved an office to New York?

P: Oh yes. But, that was well after the Save Our Valley Campaign. I thought you meant the Save Our Valley Campaign in which we tried to get national denominations to open up very large savings accounts in local banks. Is that what you meant?

B: No, I'm moving beyond that. I'm sorry. What was the move to New York? Was that just to spread the word, if you will?

P: Yes, it was. We just felt that it was time to get more of the nation involved then. If we were to develop the



political clout that we needed to get Washington, to get the White House to listen to us, that we were going to have to get some national religious leaders on board to put some pressure on Washington. Bishop Malone alone couldn't do it and John Sharick alone couldn't do it. We needed some big names.

So, he did open up an office in New York and I think ran into a lot of red tape. He was successful to a point, but not as successful as I would have thought he would be, because, by this time, I knew his personality and how dynamic and convincing he could be.

All the people that he was contacting, of course, they had their own denominations to answer to. This wasn't the only issue that they were interested in at the time. But, you're right, that's why he went. We needed bigger names.

B: Do you know where his office was located?

P: I could probably find it if I page through here. I think that Dick Fernandez operated out of the same building as John Collins, so I will give you Collins' address, just in case. I think they were in the same building, just their offices were down the hall or something. John Collins' address is room 566, 475 Riverside Drive, New York 10027.

B: What was the response to the campaign locally, getting back to the Save Our Valley Campaign.

P: If we're going to continue this, we're going to have to get something straight. When you say, "Save Our Valley Campaign," you don't necessarily mean just the savings account? You mean the whole effort of the Coalition, right?

B: Yes.

P: Okay, because when you say Save Our Valley, I keep thinking just the savings accounts, which is what that was called. You mean the whole Campaign.

Do you want to know the reactions of any group in particular or just the community in general?

B: No, just what kind of responses you got from the community at large.

P: At times we were grateful and overwhelmed at the response that we got, the positive response that we got. But, I think that as we were going on, day to day, when

we were honest with ourselves and now, a couple years later, the response was disappointing.

It was really amazing. We were getting so much publicity. We were in the news everyday or several times a week on television and on the radio. It was really amazing the number of people who didn't know what the Ecumenical Coalition was and couldn't even pronounce it, which was surprising. We were really in the news a lot. Most people knew what we wanted to do and that was all. All they knew is that we wanted to save the steel mills. Then, there were a smaller group of people who knew how we wanted to do it through worker ownership. Then, as the campaign got increasingly sophisticated and complicated, there were fewer and fewer people who understood or even knew what we were about.

Time and time again we would have rallies or meetings or different kinds of meetings, say, at union halls. Time and time again we were disappointed at the turnout. When some of the other mills started to shut down after Sheet and Tube was closed, McDonald Works, and they started forming their own groups and trying to do something, generally, I felt sorry for them. But, for one fleeting moment, I thought, "It serves you right because two or three years ago that you could have helped us . . . ?"

But, I would say that the response was disappointing. I don't know if we could have done anything to help. I guess maybe it's just human nature that people don't respond unless it affects them personally. Even a large number of steelworkers who were laid off, we still didn't draw huge numbers. Whenever we needed volunteers--and I had a large list of steelworkers I would call--I could count on the same group of maybe eight, no more than that.

B: Out of about how many?

P: Out of 5,000 or you know, however many.

B: Oh, I'm referring to the list.

P: Well, the list probably initially came from the group who showed up at the Boardman Methodist Church that very first meeting. I wasn't even aware of the Coalition then. That was even before the office was established. The initial list probably came from therein, which people signed up and said they would be willing to work in any number of different areas.

Then, I would call a steelworker and he would give me two or three names or I would call a union president or vice president and he'd give me two or three names. So, I don't think my list ever approached 100. But out of 5,000 that were laid off, you had 100 people that I knew about that were vaguely interested. Then, you only had no more than a dozen who were willing to come down and work.

B: Given all of that, do you think that the overall effort was successful by whatever criteria you want to measure success?

P: Oh, I don't know. A couple of these plane plants that may open out at the airport, some people may even say they're trying to get started here because of the Coalition, because at the time that we were getting all this publicity about Youngstown, there were a lot of reports out in the national press about how it was such a depressed area. I think there probably were industries who took a look at Youngstown who maybe wouldn't even have heard about Youngstown or wouldn't have considered it. I don't see too many of them flocking here.

Was it a success or was it not a success? I don't feel in my heart it was a failure, but if your talking about tangible results, I guess it was a failure. But at the time I was going through it, I didn't feel like that.

B: I wasn't putting a measurement on how I was viewing it strictly because success can be weighed in many terms. I was trying to get your reaction to your criteria.

P: I think there were some successful aspects to it. I think that the publicity Youngstown got, world-wide publicity, had to help. Maybe it won't even pay off for seven or eight years. What if some guy comes in here ten years from now with a plant and said, "I read about Youngstown ten years ago, but at the time I wasn't in a financial position to move my company here." I mean, it might pay off in the long run. I don't know. But we did get a lot of good publicity. A lot of people worked hard.

I think the steelworkers, even though its a small number, I think some of them became organized other than on the union level. Groups of them got together and they did try to do something.

I would say we had limited success in several areas, but we were not successful overall in our big goal.

B: Do you think there's anything that you think is important that I haven't mentioned that you would like to mention that was part of that total effort?

P: The one thing that really bugs me about the whole thing, is that we had been promised help by Jimmy Carter or at least he hinted at help time and time again. We felt that the White House lied to us and deceived us. At the time that Jack Watson was telling us we had a good chance of having our feasibility study okayed, at the same time, we found out later, they really didn't have any intention of considering it seriously. I felt that we were stabbed in the back by Carter.

What I find ironic and almost disgusting, is the fact that last November in the election he carried this area. Sometimes you just want to kick yourself in the head and say, "How could they do that. How could they vote for this man, who practically is shoveling the dirt on the grave of Youngstown as fast as he can?"

B: You're referring to some of the legality that came out through the Freedom of Information Act?

P: Yes, I am.

B: Do you know who acquired that information?

P: You mean who applied for it?

B: Yes, who actually did?

P: Well, my husband may have been one of them because, at the time, he was covering this for the Vindicator, which made for an interesting home life. Not only did he seek that information while he was at the Vindicator, but he also went after the information now that he's at the Tribune. That may have been concerning the merger rather than the Coalition. I don't know if Dick Fernandez or anyone connected . . .

B: What I was trying to get at was, it was some individual-- and I don't remember her name--had applied for information through Congressman Carney's office in relations of the Freedom of Information Act related to the merger. I thought that was maybe somehow related.

P: Somebody connected with Carney's office?

B: No, it was an individual in the district who had applied through Congressman Carney's office to get information.

P: No, I don't know who that might be.

B: Okay. Finally, do you feel that clergy should be involved in these kind of issues, social justice issues?

P: Yes, I do. I didn't see anyone else coming forward. During Jackie Alfred's campaign to try to get the Committee of 100 organized, she went to mostly businessmen. She really didn't deal with the clergy. I didn't see them coming forward with ideas. They would stand back and say, "It's not going to work. It's not going to work and this is the reason." They didn't come forward with any ideas of their own. I don't see any reason why clergy should not be involved.

I do not attend any church regularly. I'm kind of a lapsed Catholic. I don't consider myself an unreligious person. I just don't go to church. I have never met so many admirable people in my life. Almost everyone connected with the Coalition, the ministers were so dedicated and sincere about what they were doing. They were really decent people. I have had a lot of contacts with priests and generally, I found myself more impressed with the Protestants than I did with the priests involved, not only priests from the Coalition, but the priests I knew from my past involvements with the Church.

I think that anybody who has the determination and the drive and the foresight and anybody who wants to help, why not? I think that Youngstown desperately needs anybody that can help and they were tireless in their efforts, literally tireless. I've never seen people work so hard in my life as the Steering Committee and the Executive Committee did on this effort.

B: Thank you very much for giving us your time this afternoon.

P: Oh, you're quite welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW