CitizenDoucot

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The first order of business, as the old protest veterans gather this drizzly February afternoon, is just where to demonstrate.

Meeting in the upstairs den of the old Victorian, Chris, Jackie and Brian are going over plans for this year's Stations of the Cross with their friend Steve. Each Good Friday, going back more than 20 years at least, demonstrators outside the Naval Submarine Base at Groton have reenacted the steps of Jesus down the Via Dolorosa to protest military violence.

Generally, they conclude with an "action," an act of civil disobedience in which several will risk arrest. One year, a group blocked the access road to the base; another year, protesters planted a chrysanthemum in front of the guardhouse.

This year, Steve is thinking of a new venue. The 103rd Fighter Wing of the Connecticut Air National Guard is training for a fall deployment to Kuwait, from where Connecticut pilots will join in patrolling the southern no-fly zone over Iraq. Steve asks his friends what they think of doing the Stations at the Air Guard base in East Granby.

"At this point, they expect us at the sub base on Good Friday," Steve says. "How do we not play into their hands? Let them gear up for us, and then we don't show up. We show up somewhere else, where they're not prepared. I think that would be stunning."

Downstairs, Micah and Ammon, home from school for the week, bicker and giggle over a game of Sorry! with friends from the neighborhood. Students on break from Northwest Catholic High School sidestep their way down a front hall narrowed by bags of groceries earmarked for local families. Out front, someone will have to take in the card tables, now emptied of the second-hand clothes left free for the taking. And there's that washing machine strapped into the back of the truck, to be delivered to a friend this afternoon.

Jackie, who figures she's done the Stations at the sub base just about every year since the late 1970s - excepting those years she was in prison - isn't sure she wants to give up the tradition.

"I think it would be good to do something up at the air base," the 39-year-old says. "But I don't want to stop going down to Groton. In some way, there's something kind of sacred about it."

The computer hums quietly at the desk where the housemates write begging letters and thank-you notes. Shelves groan with volumes on Iraq, the Holocaust and Dorothy Day, along with more prosaic paperbacks on parenting and eating well. The walls are covered with art by Monet and Brian, a spider plant, a poster of Doug Flutie.

Brian, who has been down to reconnoiter the sub base a week or two before, reports a new installation at the Submarine Force Museum.

"They just put up a missile, a mock-up of a Polaris missile, there in the yard, between the conning tower and the fence," the 57-year-old says. "On it, it says `Polaris: Guardian of Peace.' The idolatry of that is incredible."

That settles it. Next question: With such an inviting target, who wants to throw blood?

Jackie says they'll have to borrow blood-drawing equipment. Chris, 33, tossing a football in the air, says he won't need it.

"I've still got some of my blood in the freezer," he says.

I first met Christopher Allen-Doucot last February in New York. I was in journalism school then, pursuing a

master's degree while working at The Courant, and looking for someone to profile for an assignment on commitment. Chris had spoken at my church about the life he and Jackie had chosen, living in voluntary poverty with their young sons Micah and Ammon in Hartford's North End, relying on donations to help feed, clothe and shelter their neighbors and themselves. I called him days before the exercise was due.

Chris was willing to meet, but was leaving for the city, where he would be speaking at what organizers were calling a teach-in on the sanctions on Iraq. We made plans to get together Saturday morning at Maryhouse, the brick house on East Third Street that was home to Dorothy Day, the journalist, pacifist, poverty worker and, lately, a candidate for sainthood.

The morning prayer service was breaking up, loosing a flood of 100 or so peace activists into the street. All seemed to know Chris; a young woman with long hair pointed me toward Judson Memorial Church, the storied center of dissent on Washington Square in Greenwich Village.

We sat on a landing outside the church meeting hall. Of medium height, with thick arms and legs and big laborer's hands, Chris looked more like a fullback than the high school runner he had been before his right knee gave out. His tousled hair, heavy eyebrows and eyes were all the same deep brown. His cheeks had been hollowed by a 30-day fast for the people of Iraq, during which he had lost 25 pounds. An inch-long crease, pink and deep, ran from the left corner of his mouth toward his ear.

Later, much later, as we drove across the desert from Amman to Baghdad, we would talk about the experiences we shared in common. We were born within eight months and 10 miles of each other, both the second of four children. Both Catholics, we attended rival Jesuit colleges, where we each considered, then dropped, pre-medicine majors. We had read many of the same books, worked in many of the same campus organizations, argued for many of the same ideas.

But as he described the arc of his life during that first meeting, I refrained from pointing out what I thought were similarities in our background. I wanted to hear what he had done with them.

Chris was in his sophomore year at Holy Cross, where the sports teams are called the Crusaders, when he encountered Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement.

Born on the eve of the 20th century, Day dabbled with Marxism and socialism before converting to Catholicism at age 30. Reading the Gospels as impelling Christians to combat poverty, violence and injustice, she abandoned middle-class comfort to live among and serve the destitute of the Bowery. Her activism spanned the century, from women's suffrage before World War I through nuclear disarmament in the 1970s. Through the Catholic Worker, the newspaper she co-founded in 1933, she encouraged the loose network of communal homes from which followers continue her work.

When Chris was a child growing up in gritty Malden, Mass., Charles and Angela Doucot would scold him with Jesus's injunction: "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, you do to me." Chris took the injunction literally, and believed it applied to his failures to act as well as his actions. If someone somewhere was suffering, Chris was responsible to help.

Now Day was showing him how. Already active in Amnesty International and Greenpeace, Chris began volunteering at the Sts. Francis and Therese Catholic Worker House of Hospitality in Worcester, baking bread and welcoming homeless guests.

At Holy Cross, he began to protest the ROTC presence on campus, and learned quickly the polarizing effect of dissent. Each week, he jokes, the school newspaper would run a letter for him, a letter against him, and a letter by him. But the movement grew, from his one-man protest outside the year-ending ROTC dinner his sophomore year to the mass demonstration at the same event his senior year.

He also learned the difficulty of effecting change. Chris Doucot came and went, but the ROTC remains at Holy Cross.

On the day in 1989 that he graduated, Chris moved into the Sts. Francis and Therese house.

It was through Catholic Worker friends that Chris met Jacqueline Allen in 1991. Raised in the South End of

Hartford, the daughter of an Army nurse-turned-pacifist, Jackie began joining her older sisters in protests at the Millstone nuclear power plant in the late 1970s, when she was still at South Catholic High School. Later, she became active in the Plowshares movement, joining anti-nuclear activists who took their name from the prophet Micah, who spoke of beating swords into plowshares.

Jackie learned of the Catholic Worker movement in Alderson Federal Prison in West Virginia. She was serving two years for banging a hammer and emptying a jar of her own blood on a B-52 at Griffis Air Force Base in upstate New York.

On meeting, Chris and Jackie recognized a common mission. They courted during the buildup to the Gulf War by defacing the pro-military billboards that sprung up along I-290 in Worcester - “Support Our Troops” became “Snort Our Poops” - then going out for beers. When they married, the Rev. Daniel Berrigan, the Vietnam-era draft protester, celebrated the wedding Mass.

As newlyweds, Chris and Jackie would drive down from Worcester on Sunday mornings for the Gospel music Mass at St. Michael’s Church on Clark Street. Jackie knew the neighborhood; she had worked as a shift supervisor at My Sister’s Place, the shelter for women nearby.

One could have looked at Clay-Arsenal then as another urban wasteland of abandoned buildings and boarded-up storefronts and vacant lots littered with dime bags and spent rubbers, rife with joblessness, drug abuse and gang violence. Or one could have seen families struggling to make enough money to survive, to raise strong children, to keep decent homes. Certainly all co-existed in one of the poorest neighborhoods of one of the nation’s poorest cities.

Chris and Jackie prayed on opening a house in the neighborhood. When Brian Kavanagh, a friend at St. Mike’s with whom they had not shared the idea, asked after Mass one Sunday when they were going to bring the Catholic Worker to Hartford, they believed their prayers had been answered.

Chris, Jackie and Brian bought the abandoned Victorian at 26 Clark St. and opened the St. Martin de Porres Catholic Worker House of Hospitality in 1993. The name honored the 17th century Dominican friar who built hospitals for the sick and schools for the poor. Son of a Spanish nobleman and a free black woman, he would make a fitting role model, the housemates believed, for a neighborhood divided roughly equally among African Americans, West Indians and Latinos.

Catholic Workers live in voluntary poverty, eschewing jobs because they generate taxes that support the military. The housemates of St. Martin de Porres - joined now by friends Jerry Berrigan, nephew of Daniel, and Molly Mechtenberg - visit churches for money to run the food co-op and the furniture pantry, to shelter and clothe the homeless, to pay for the food baskets at Easter and Thanksgiving, to fund the neighborhood cleanup each spring. And they need money to travel. Chris journeys around the country to talk about the U.N. embargo of Iraq. Brian and Jackie join in demonstrations at the School of the Americas, a training program for Latin American military leaders at Fort Benning, Ga., and the Naval bombing range at Vieques, Puerto Rico.

“As Christians we are committed to creating a more peaceful world,” the house manifesto reads. “We believe that it is the moral duty of people of good will to come to the aid and defense of those who are oppressed.”

It’s Saturday morning, and the front room is alive with children. A dozen, ranging in age from 2-year-old Sophie to 12-year-old Jesus, sit in a circle on the floor of the front room, playing a rhyming, hand-slapping game: Crackadillo, Oh my, quack, quack, quack. Listen to my tika, my tika-tika tack. From the kitchen, Jackie calls the children, one by one, to dress a cookie with frosting and jimmies for after lunch.

In a neighborhood where 97 percent of elementary school students are eligible for the free lunch program, down the street from a school where 3 percent of last year’s fourth-graders met the state goal on three mastery tests, in a system where 51 percent of ninth-graders do not graduate from high school, in a city with an infant mortality rate twice the national average, the housemates focus much of their time and energy on the children.

They welcome neighborhood kids to play in their backyard, with its swings, monkey bars, slide and basketball hoop. They tutor students after school. They open the house for arts and crafts on Saturdays. They take middle school kids to a summer camp in Voluntown to swim and fish and talk about challenges back home: what to do

when a boy pressures you for sex, when someone offers you drugs, when a police officer wants to talk to you.

The children have led the housemates to their families. There was the night one came running to the house screaming that his mother's boyfriend was about to kill her. Brian comforted the child; Chris went to the apartment to find the woman badly beaten. He took her back to the house and helped her find a new apartment. There was the boy who told Chris his family's basement apartment had flooded. Chris went to the child's home to find his AIDS-stricken mother lying on a mattress on a floor an inch deep in raw sewage. The housemates gave the children new clothes, helped the family move to a new apartment, and brought the woman to an attorney to write out a living will. On other occasions, they have helped find medical care for sick neighbors, training programs for the jobless, tuition money for children to go to parochial schools.

But such concerns feel far removed from the dining room table at the St. Martin de Porres house this Saturday as the kids gather around. Photographs of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin and Jackie's mother, Mickey, keep watch over the children as they dig into a lunch of macaroni and cheese and baked beans. Along one wall are stacked wooden boxes assembled by high school students in Willimantic and filled with crayons, books, microwave popcorn and other treats. Each child will take one home before leaving this afternoon.

As they eat, a young man pulls up to the house with a car full of toys. Aaron, 21, has graduated from the University of Connecticut this spring and cleaned out his boyhood bedroom. He brings board games and puzzles, and model rockets, cars and planes. Jackie thanks him for his generosity, and invites him in to eat, but he's on his way to somewhere else.

As Aaron leaves, Chris sees Micah eyeing a colorful box holding the parts to assemble an F-15 fighter jet. He puts his arm around his son, takes the box and points at the picture.

"Do you see what these are?" he asks.

"Bombs?" Micah guesses.

"What happens when they fall?"

"They explode?" Micah asks.

"And what happens?" Chris asks. "My friends that I visit in Iraq are killed."

The plan worked beautifully. First Brian, having waited for the general to complete his remarks, rose from his seat in the front row of the balcony.

"The Gulf War wasn't a great military victory," he called out to Norman Schwarzkopf. "It was a slaughter."

As necks craned toward the lanky redhead, Chris Wallace, moderating this night's installment of the Connecticut Forum, tried to regain control.

"Folks, let me, sir, sir, let me suggest, let me suggest something if I might," Wallace said. "This is a con, this is a conversation, and the second half of this, this program is going to be an, actually, an open forum, so if you instead of interrupting us now would simply write your question down I promise you I will ask your question of General Schwarzkopf."

Applause from the audience. As the housemates expected, the Bushnell's security officers came racing down the long balcony aisle to gather up Brian and take him away. Which left the floor open for Chris to begin his filibuster unmolested.

"Innocent children have died because of the sanctions," he shouted, and the boos began.

"Shut up!" someone shouted angrily.

Chris continued to bellow. Onstage, Schwarzkopf kept his eyes down, his mouth set in a tight smile. Washington Post publisher Katharine Graham, appearing with the general for this program on leadership, turned to Wallace.

“I think they have to handle it up there,” she said, apparently unaware her comments were being picked up by the microphone. “There’s nothing you can do. You have to let them take them out.”

“Six hundred thousand Iraqi children have died because of sanctions,” Chris shouted. “General Schwarzkopf, please repent. Do what you can to lift the sanctions.”

A gaggle of Bushnell ushers, silver-haired, red-jacketed ladies, stood helplessly around Chris.

“Sir, if you would like to be part of a conversation,” Wallace said, “which is what this evening is all about, it is the Connecticut Forum, we would be happy to have you ask your question when the time comes, along with every-body else, but please, it doesn’t seem to me it’s fair for you to try to impose your -”

“I wanted to ask the general to lift the sanctions against Iraq,” Chris said. “Innocent children are dying.”

The loudest boos yet.

“Do we have security here?” Wallace asked.

Yes. Several hustled Chris toward an elevator, to applause.

“That is not leadership!” Chris cried as he was dragged away. “That is genocide! That is the murder of children!”

In the elevator, one security officer demanded Chris’s ticket. He promised he would remember Chris, and make certain he was never allowed back into the building.

The elevator doors opened, and Chris stepped into the hot glare of the television lights. With the cameras of every Hartford station recording, he delivered the sound bite he had memorized.

Chris was still in Worcester in August 1990 when Iraqi President Saddam Hussein ordered his army into Kuwait. That fall, while the U.S.-led coalition was massing forces for Operation Desert Storm, he joined a regular vigil for peace at the city’s war memorial.

Since the war, Chris has focused on the embargo. The U.N. Security Council renewed wide-ranging sanctions after the Iraqi surrender to compel the regime to cooperate with international weapons inspections. In seven years, weapons experts uncovered materials for nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and missiles before Iraq declared itself disarmed and blocked further access to its weapons plants and laboratories. The United Nations withdrew its inspectors at the end of 1998 and the United States and Britain punished the regime by bombing government sites for three days.

The stalemate continues. Iraq has blocked inspectors from returning; the embargo remains in place.

Sanctions have crippled the Iraqi economy. Rules that block the import of weapons materials have also kept out equipment for hospitals, power plants and water treatment facilities. With access to drinking water, food and medicine all limited, Unicef blames the embargo in the deaths of more than 1 million Iraqis. Children under 5 account for half the deaths.

As the death toll mounts, and the thirst for Iraqi crude grows, support for the sanctions has crumbled. Among the permament members of the Security Council, Russia, China and France all have called for an end to the embargo. The United States, intent on keeping the regime of Saddam Hussein isolated, continues to champion the sanctions.

Chris made his first trip to Iraq in 1998 with a delegation of anti-sanctions activists. The group visited hospitals and schools and families; Chris saw for himself the impact of the embargo on Iraqi society: children hungry, sick and dying; out-of-work adults begging; families torn apart by death and despair. But for all the misery, he was struck by the kindness with which ordinary Iraqis welcomed him into their homes and lives.

On that first trip, Chris became involved in Voices in the Wilderness, a Chicago-based anti-sanctions campaign. Now he leads delegations to Iraq, showing students, teachers, clergy and activists the effects of the sanctions.

“America is a democracy,” he says. “Our government fights wars with our permission and support. I want to take

people to see what they're supporting, to see that it's not worthy of our support, and to go home and work against it."

Chris is a familiar figure in Iraq. He has appeared on Iraqi television, and Voices is well known here. It seems as if everyone, from the ambassadorial-level Iraqi officials with whom he meets to the street children who wait outside Baghdad's Hotel al-Fanar to shine his shoes, knows Mr. Chris. In his fifth visit - all in violation of a U.S. travel ban - he is welcomed as an old friend at the hotel, at the bureau where he exchanges U.S. dollars for Iraqi dinars, at the International Businessman's Center, where he makes telephone calls home. He is mobbed by crowds in the slums of Baghdad and Basra. Everywhere he is invited into homes, where poor Iraqis insist on sharing food they clearly can't spare.

Chris has brought three activists with him on this visit. By traveling to Iraq in violation of the embargo, all are risking $1 million in fines and 12 years in federal prison. The Treasury Department, which enforces the travel ban to stem the flow of U.S. dollars to Iraq, has warned Voices of the potential penalty, but has not arrested anyone. Voices leaders say they would welcome the media attention their arrests would draw. The government has declined to make martyrs of them.

The Courant has sent photographer Brad Clift and me to follow Chris in his anti-sanctions work, and to report conditions in Iraq on our own (journalists are exempted from the travel restrictions). This is something of a coup for Chris, who has been trying for years to get his hometown newspaper to explore the issue. But he is also busy producing a report of his own: the iconoclastic filmmaker Michael Moore, who skewered General Motors Chairman Roger Smith in the documentary "Roger and Me," has asked Chris to film himself delivering a sanctions-busting package to an Iraqi family for his satirical "The Awful Truth" television show. The cardboard care package, which Chris has imported in violation of the embargo, includes some of America's most obnoxious groceries: Twinkies, Froot Loops, macaroni and cheese and Pepto-Bismol. Moore bought the food after taking over a gas station in upstate New York for a day to sell what he claimed was gasoline refined from Iraqi oil.

Chris has in mind a family he has visited before. Kareema Salman is a 33-year-old widow with eight hungry children ranging in age from 5 to 16. She scrapes by cleaning houses for the wealthy residents of the Karradah section of Baghdad; her oldest son, Ali, works as a shop assistant. All nine live in a low stone house with a sitting room, a kitchen, and a sleeping room. The bathroom is a bucket with a hose. The cooling system is a blocky box in the sitting room in which a fan blows air over a tray of water. The family relies on rations of flour, rice, lentils and other staples the government buys with proceeds from the U.N.-monitored oil-for-food program.

"There is not enough sugar," Salman says. "There is not enough cooking oil. My children need apples, oranges, bananas. We don't eat meat."

Their home is a 10-minute walk from the hotel; Chris knows the way. He has brought an Iraqi friend to help interpret. He is concerned that the family understand why he has brought them this junk food. The Arabic-language leaflet he carries to explain the mission of Voices in the Wilderness tends to produce confusion; the name of the organization translates as "Screaming in the Prairie." Chris wonders how his friend will be able to explain political satire to Kareema and her children.

But Kareema says she understands, and her girls - 13-year-old Fatima, 12-year-old Zainab, and 8-year-old twins Duva and Hiba - giggle with anticipation. So Chris, standing in a walled courtyard next to the house that is scarcely big enough to hold everyone, opens the package and begins to show its contents to the children.

Holding up a single-serving box of Frosted Flakes, he does his best Tony the Tiger: "They're Grrreat!" He apologizes for a flattened Twinkie: "This was a cake with cream filling," he says. "But after 14 hours on the plane and 12 hours across the desert, it didn't survive sanctions." He tries to explain the Pepto-Bismol by puffing out his cheeks, rubbing his belly and moaning.

The children squeal with delight and dig into the groceries. Five-year-old Mahmoud gets the Froot Loops. Heartbreakingly, the thin, barefoot child offers Loops to each well-dressed visitor.

"I feel like a pimp," Chris says on the walk back to the hotel. "I wouldn't have done it if there weren't some merit to it. It's helping to get the message out."

He remains ambivalent. Days later, he returns with apples, peaches, plums and watermelon from a nearby market. Kareema invites us in. Without cameras or interpreters, we talk in charades. The girls sing in Arabic and perform schoolyard dances. Chris sings the first words of “My Heart Will Go On,” the love theme from “Titanic.” The girls join in, in English.

“That movie was huge here,” Chris says after the joyful visit. “My theory is that it’s a metaphor for Iraq - all these people, every level of society, all in the same boat - and it’s going down.”

Chris arrives at the children’s cemetery at mid-afternoon. A thick haze blankets the hot, sand-scrubbed city, clouding its domes and minarets, dimming the sun itself. Dust devils swirl amid the small cement headstones and the little dirt mounds that clutter the burying ground, warning of the sandstorm to come.

Chris is sitting at the edge of the field on a discarded wooden spool, the kind used to coil cable, when the young woman arrives. Wind billows her black robe open, revealing a scarlet dress pulled tight over a swollen belly. Pregnant herself, she is the aunt of the child whose remains she now holds. Chris watches as she picks her way through the cemetery to the hutch at the center. There she surrenders the shoebox-sized carton to an elderly man in white robe and headwrap.

A younger worker takes the newborn’s body into the hutch and lays it on a stone slab. The baby girl’s skin is bright red amid the grays and browns of the cemetery. The worker measures the tiny body and cuts a length of white linen to match.

Together, the aunt and the worker wash the baby with soap and water. The man lays the baby onto the linen and anoints her with the white powder from the cidra tree. He swaddles the baby’s body and head in the white linen wrap, says a prayer, and hands the bundle to the young woman. She processes alone through the markers, holding her dead niece against her own unborn baby, to a freshly dug, child-sized grave.

Chris has watched children die. He has mourned with parents. Just yesterday, at the Basra Maternity and Pediatrics Hospital, amid emaciated infants succumbing to cholera, typhoid and other easily cured diseases, he saw a baby that had been born without a head.

But in five trips to Iraq, this was his first burial. Back at the hotel, he focuses on the reverence with which the cemetery worker prepared that tiny, lifeless body.

“This was not a slab of meat to that man,” he says, his throat catching. “He could not have been more respectful. He didn’t need a cleric’s robes to show that he was a holy man. Even the manner in which the goats were shooed away - they were tapped gingerly on the butt - the whole scene was full of dignity and respect.

“My God, what if that were my child? Why can’t people have such reverence for life? Why can’t people respect the body that much when it’s living?”

He continues to talk, his mind reeling almost visibly from idea to impression to idea: “The anti-abortion folks back home - 24 hours earlier, this baby’s in utero. Why aren’t they trying to stop this? ... I want to call Jackie. I know if I talk to her, I’m just going to bawl. I’m not going to be able to say anything. She’s going to freak out ... People back home need to see death. They need to see that this is the policy they have wrought by our hands ... either the pilot who drops the bombs or the congressman who doesn’t stop it or the guy who pays his taxes - it’s too clean. They need to see this ... Almost every grave was from 1998, 1999 - all these tiny graves for babies under 2 ... We need to be at these places. We need to be full participants in life. We can’t let life happen to us. We need to create it, and care for it and protect it ... When we bury ourselves in comfort, we lose touch with humanity. The mystical body of Christ begins to break ... We are our brother’s keepers. If I see a kid running across Clark Street, I don’t say that’s not my kid. There’s a kid running across, and I’ve got to stop him or he’s going to get hit. If there are bodies floating down the stream, you found out where they’re coming from. We are one body. We have to care for each other ... Anyone can kill bodies. The only one who can kill the spirit is oneself. We kill our own spirits ...”

He is crying freely now. His voice trails off. “I want to go home,” he says.

“This is the part that freaks Jackie out. People don’t know. As hard as it is to show the slides, people don’t know. When I get short with people ... I can’t be outside of suffering. Social workers call it professional distance.

I'm not professional and I don't want to be."

Silence. Finally, he thinks of his 7-year-old.

"I fear for Micah," he says. "Because he's like this. He cries for other people. And it's not going to be an easy life for him."

Jackie didn't want me to write about throwing blood. In the scene that opens this piece, when the housemates met in their den to plan the Stations at the sub base, she prefaced her remark about borrowing blood-drawing equipment by telling me it would be off the record. But after Chris said he had blood in the freezer, I told her I wanted to write about it. I told her I would argue the point with her later.

Several weeks after that meeting, we're at T-Bowl in Newington - I bowl with the Catholic Workers - and Chris leans over and tells me it might be a good night to talk to Jackie. We're in the bar when I bring the subject up.

Blood freaks people out, Jackie says. We can wave signs and sing songs and say prayers and do actions, but there's something about blood that freaks people out.

Jackie, that's why it's so powerful, Chris says. He threw his blood at the White House last summer.

Jackie does not like protesting. She does not relish confrontation. She is uncomfortable standing outside the mainstream and telling it what she thinks it's doing wrong. She talks about feeling like a jerk, of embarrassing herself in front of the community in which she has grown up.

And yet of all the housemates, she has taken part in the most severe actions, and served the most prison time. Plowshares activists, who break into military installations to bang hammers and pour blood on nuclear weapons, are at the hard core of the peace movement, and face the strongest sanctions.

I tell her I hope this story will explain why the protesters protest. It is not because they are misfits, or because they want attention. They are ordinary people, good neighbors and loving parents, Christians who believe Thou Shalt Not Kill means Thou Shalt Not Kill. Who are horrified by the sums spent on weapons and killing machines when millions of Americans live in poverty, without decent housing, education or employment. Who see the cause and effect between over-consumption in the United States and poverty in the rest of the world. People who, unlike the many who basically agree, or who refuse to see, cannot rest until their community reorders its priorities according to the values it professes to hold most dear: peace, justice and equality.

It's the children, Jackie says. They come to the door, one after the other, and they're hungry, they don't have decent clothes, they live in a hovel, the schools can't afford to educate them. And you begin to see the missiles strapped to their backs.

Are you going to write only about the protests, or are you going to talk about what we do in the neighborhood? Are you going to show how it's all one thing?

On Good Friday, Threatcom at Submarine Base New London, according to the sign on the perimeter fence, is Normal.

"That's disgusting," Chris says. "It's like the weather or the forest fire danger: Drive down to the sub base to find out the threat of war."

Jerry holds the crucifix created by Brian: a life-sized Jesus, crowned with thorns and bleeding from the holes in his hands and feet, nailed to crossed nuclear submarines. The three dozen demonstrators, from churches throughout Connecticut, gather near the main entrance of the base.

Local police officers watch the group from cruisers parked in the vacant lot across from the entrance, in front of the Submarine Force Museum, and down the street, while base security officers peer out from the guardhouse.

The housemates have settled on the child as the theme for this year's Stations. Steve, the English teacher, reads the preamble.

“Again we come to this place manufactured by madness, a mirror image of Calvary, where death pretends to have the last word,” he says. “Because of this place, and places like it at Kings Bay, Georgia, and Vieques, Puerto Rico, and the jungles of Colombia, every child lives in danger. Today, we will name these fearful places as we walk, and bring to them the promise of resurrection that Jesus of Nazareth asks of us.”

Someone hangs a wooden sign on the chain-link perimeter fence to mark the first Station: Jesus Is Condemned to Death. The worshippers read from photocopied sheets.

“And Jesus said, `See that you do not despise any of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in Heaven always look upon the face of God.’ “

Now Chris speaks.

“In the cradle place, Ur, Babylon, Iraq, civilization is savaged by the civilized,” he says. “Every month, five thousand children are condemned to death without trial or guilt by the indiscriminate brutality of economic sanctions.”

The small group responds as one: “And Jesus turned to them and said, `Do not weep for me; weep instead for yourselves and your children.’ “

The police and security officers watch as the worshippers move down the fence for the next Station: Jesus Takes the Cross. And on the group continues, working its way down the fence, hanging signs at each Station - Jesus Falls, Jesus Is Stripped Naked, Jesus Is Nailed to the Cross - and praying for answers to AIDS in Africa, land mines in Asia, the Balkans and Central America, poverty in the United States.

In the end, the demonstrators decline to throw blood - not enough time to prepare, and they thought it would distract from the wooden signs and their messages. For the 15th and final station, the group wants to return to the base entrance, to hang the last wooden sign - Jesus Is Risen - on the guardhouse. Jackie, her sister Teri, their 81-year-old mother Mickey, Molly and Cal, a Vietnam vet who demonstrates often at the base, approach the entrance. A trio of large enlisted men jog out to intercept them.

“No further, ma’am,” one of the young soldiers says to the group as a whole.

“We just want to hang a sign and say a prayer,” Jackie says.

“No, ma’am,” the soldier says.

Stymied, the protesters stretch out across the entrance, blocking traffic.

“We know what goes on here,” Teri shouts. “We mean you no harm. If we don’t speak out, we give the impression that we approve and condone everything that goes on here, and we do not.”

Chris watches from the curb. A veteran of civil disobedience, he has been arrested dozens of times, but will sit this one out. He and Jackie will not risk arrest together. Someone has to return home to the boys.

Traffic outside the base jams up. A man in a pickup truck stares straight at the protesters and guns his engine. “Protesters suck!” shouts another.

Minutes pass. Local police and base security officers pore over a map, perhaps to figure out who has jurisdiction. A portly man in a business suit who appears to be a base security supervisor puts his hand on Mickey’s shoulder.

“Please don’t push my mother-in-law!” Chris shouts at him angrily. “She’s an elderly woman! You want her to fall and break her hip? Get your hands off her!”

The man recoils, and tells Chris he was not pushing. Then he turns to Jackie to ask what the group is planning. She says they want only to walk to the guardhouse and say a prayer. That’s fine, he says, and tells the soldiers to let Jackie and Cal walk to the guardhouse. The standoff is over.

“This was one of the most powerful Stations we’ve had in years,” Brian says as he walks back to the pickup

truck. “The spirit was definitely with us.”

But as the protesters repair to the Bee Bee Dairy in nearby Waterford for lunch - fish and chowder; no meat on this last Lenten Friday - it isn’t clear what they have accomplished. They have made their statement. But was anyone listening?

“I don’t know if we’re trying to reach anyone in particular,” Brian says. “It’s a public testifying to the truth as we see it. The important thing is fidelity to the message that the path that we’re walking down is the path of destruction and not salvation.

“A lot of Christians will take us to task and say an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But we see God as the epitome of unconditional love, not as a vindictive guy with a big beard who slaughters his enemies. On Good Friday, we think about why Christ died for us. It wasn’t so we could build missiles and submarines and drop bombs on people.

“Things that may look ineffectual and small - a couple of people in the rain - I think it’s a very important witness,” Brian says. “It’s a mystery how it works. This is the part where people’s eyes begin to glaze over, because it has to do with theology. I think somehow if you are faithful to God’s message as you see it, God sees that and makes something good come from that. Maybe it plants a seed in people that we’ll never know about.

“The problem is that all we ever see is the people who are shouting, the hostility. But maybe that’s good, too. It shakes people out of their complacency. At least they have an opinion. At least they’re not zombies.”

The letter comes from a parishioner at a suburban church, a man who in the past has invited Chris to speak to his confirmation class. He had sent the house a donation of $500 with the proviso that the money could not be used for the housemates’ work on Iraq. Chris had responded by thanking him and sending a copy of “Iraq Notebook,” a newspaper with articles by several leading anti-sanctions activists.

The man has responded with a handwritten letter arguing for U.S. policy in Iraq. If the United States had allowed Saddam to keep Kuwait, he says, he would probably have invaded Saudi Arabia next. Then, with 40 percent of the world’s oil reserves, he probably would have obtained the arms needed to obliterate Israel.

The man accuses Chris of approving of Saddam’s regime. He says he knows the Iraqi people are suffering, but failing to contain Saddam would cause more misery in the world. He says the United States is not perfect, but it makes its choices better than any other country.

Chris bristles at being accused of apologizing for Saddam, or any official of any government. In truth, Voices declined an invitation to attend a birthday celebration for the Iraqi leader; Chris has confronted Saddam’s top lieutenant, Tariq Aziz, on the regime’s human rights abuses. What’s more, he believes the Iraqi people bear some responsibility for their predicament: They could have declined to serve in the army that invaded Kuwait; they could refuse to pump the oil that fuels the regime.

Of course, the Iraqi regime rewards attempts at dissent with torture and death. Chris believes Americans, as free citizens of the democracy now championing the sanctions, bear a greater responsibility for the suffering of the Iraqi people.

“If America wanted Saddam to know we did not support his military actions, we could have told him when he gassed the Kurds. We did not,” Chris says. “We could have prevented American companies from selling him the components for those weapons. We did not.

“If we’re concerned about peace in the Middle East right now, we could stop selling so many weapons to the surrounding countries, to Turkey, to Egypt, to Israel, to Saudi Arabia.

“The people of any society need to understand that their government, whether it is a democracy, a plutocracy or a dictatorship, is able to govern only because they consent to it. The Holocaust could have been prevented if the people of Germany wanted to stop it. People could have refused to pay taxes, to operate the trains to the camps, to build the ovens. People could have asked where the smell of burning flesh was coming from. People could have asked what happened to their Jewish neighbors, their Catholic neighbors, the gay people, the communists, the Gypsies.

“Now it’s nuclear weapons. If we use them, will the people who are left - if there are any left - ask what we could have done to stop that holocaust?”

“People need to understand that instead of a collection of nations, or a collection of multinational corporations and wealthy elites competing for resources, we could recognize each other as members of an extended family. If a family sits down to dinner, the members don’t argue about who’s going to eat. It’s not that the pie isn’t big enough; it’s that it’s not being shared.

“Most wars are fought over resources. We live in a society that over-consumes resources. It would greatly reduce the world’s strife, if we shared God’s wealth. Who’s to know what the world would look like? Hearts and minds would be open to solving the remaining divides. The pride and vanity to think that only we can solve the world’s problems! If we applied ourselves to doing God’s will, how are we to know that God wouldn’t do God’s part?”

This is the section in which, having spent more than a year with my new friends - and having imposed myself in the story with the occasional first-person declaration - I make good on the implied promise to tell you what I really think of them.

I was going to write about their commitment to their ideals, the sense of mission they bring to their work. Jackie doesn’t care for protesting? True enough, but they all find it a chore. Chris, who marched with pacifists in Bosnia during the Siege of Sarajevo, with whom I took a redeye to Moscow last fall for a conference on the sanctions, doesn’t like to travel. He can’t stand to be away from his family. Brian, happiest reading about other lands or working on one of his exquisite pen and ink drawings or drinking Guinness and watching the soccer at the Half Door, will leave shortly for a 40-day fast outside the United Nations to call for an end to the sanctions.

But it isn’t what they do. It’s what compels them to do it. The Catholic Workers hurt. Whether it is the declaration by a young neighbor that he is going to hunt down the person who shot his brother, or reports that 23 Iraqis have been killed in a missile strike, they anguish.

They are human, in the finest sense. That’s what I admire most about the Catholic Workers.

During my first meeting with Chris, sitting on the landing at Judson Memorial Church in Washington Square, I asked him about the scar stretching from the corner of his mouth. He told me the story.

He was down in the basement of the old rectory at St. Mike’s, sorting the used furniture Brian had picked up that week, when Mark came stumbling down the stairs.

“Help me!” shouted Mark, a junkie Chris knew from the neighborhood. “He’s gonna kill me!”

Mark’s pursuer followed close behind. He could have been 18 or 25, about the same size and build as Chris. Mark clambered into the pile of furniture, trying to dig a tunnel into the tables and chairs, as if he could hide there.

The kid taunted Mark: “Come on outside so we can settle our business.”

Chris stepped forward instinctively to intercept the intruder. He didn’t know him, but he recognized - and felt compassion for - the type. The kid’s eyes were bulging from their deep sockets. The tendons on his neck were pulled taut. He was sweating profusely; his breath was sour. He was high on “wet,” the local name for marijuana soaked in embalming fluid.

Chris kept his body between the kid and Mark.

“You can’t do this,” he said, in a voice so calm it surprised him.

“Why not?” the kid demanded as he looked past Chris at Mark. Chris’s mind raced to find an answer the kid would buy.

“You can’t do this,” he repeated, “because this is church property.”

The kid paused, as if considering Chris's point.

"God never done shit for me," he said.

Chris saw the hand reach for the gun and draw it back. He felt the crack as it hit the left side of his face. He felt his knees buckle. He felt the thud as the floor rose up to smack his hip, his elbow, his shoulder, his head. Then he blacked out.

Micah was 6 years old that day in October 1999. Ammon was 5. They were at home across the street when the kid knocked Chris out.

"It wasn't a random act of violence," Chris says. "Mark was drawn to us because he knew who we were. He knew where to come for help."

Chris remembers hitting the floor. He has been told he staggered outside to the parking lot of the church. He woke up on a gurney at St. Francis, where he would be stitched up and admitted. After a night in the hospital, he went home.

Mark got away, and went into hiding. Police arrested his pursuer on a warrant for some other offense a week or two later. They didn't ask Chris for a statement, and he is not sure he would have given one. He says police officers have been quick to harass his young neighbors, but slow to respond to genuine emergencies. He believes the kid showed him and his family mercy by not shooting him, and is ambivalent about providing information that could send someone to jail.

With the suspect in custody, Mark showed up at the house, shaking with withdrawal and asking for help with his addiction. Brian tried to find a program for him, but by the time a bed finally became available, he was back on heroin. The housemates still see him around the neighborhood.

The calm in Chris's voice when he spoke to the kid in the basement of the rectory stayed with him for a couple of weeks. It wasn't until after he had the stitches out that the gravity of the incident struck him.

"That was when I thought, what if he had shot instead of hit?" he says. "We prayed on that. But the truth is, our responsibility is pretty clear to us."

There are all kinds of danger, Chris says. There are the physical kinds, as when he was attacked, or the night he and Brian ran out of the house and into a firefight going on between the house two doors down and the church across the street. But there are also the spiritual kinds, which he believes he would risk if he raised his family in a segregated suburb, sheltered from the variety of race, of rich and poor, of the range of humanity. There is the danger of participating in society's continuing division, of being part of the problem, not the solution.

"The kids are really lucky," Jackie says. "They're exposed to an incredible variety of people. Neither one of them will grow up to be prejudicial. They will never fear someone just because they're different.

"I think we have a great life. We have a beautiful house, with a beautiful backyard. We have happy kids who get to go to camp every summer. We have a lot of fun. We have flexible schedules, there's no boss - except Chris. We get to travel.

"This is how we feel God wants us to live. I'm not one of those who likes to talk about her religion. I think people should tell your religion by the way you live. Rather than tell people I'm a Christian, I'd like people to see us feeding and caring for the hungry and say, `She must be a Christian.' ''

To Chris, the attack in the rectory basement proved the value of the work he and Jackie and Brian were doing in Clay-Arsenal: Mark, who never had been much interested in Chris's assistance, had run to him in his moment of need.

"We want to be known as the place people can go to for help," Chris says. "There's a passage where Jesus says, in essence, fear is useless. What is needed is trust. It's one of the most powerful things he says. As Christians, we have to believe it.

“We try not to fear. We try to trust. We know where our work is.”