


[Home](#)
[Members](#)
[Gold Stars Speak](#)
[In The News](#)
[Photo Gallery](#)
[Links](#)
[Essays, Articles](#)
[PTSD](#)
[Military Related Suicide](#)
[About Us](#)
[Join Us](#)
[Contact Us](#)

[Search GSFSO](#)

We cannot be complacent

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By Christine Tetreault/ Correspondent for Needham Times
Thursday, November 16, 2006

At the peeling of the First Parish church bell, more than 30 Needham residents, young and old, stepped inside from Saturday afternoon's unseasonably warm winds and bright sunshine to remember current troops and veterans, and to add their voices to the Needham Interfaith Peace Vigil's "End the War in Iraq Now/Bring Our Troops Home" program.

Needham Interfaith holds a weekly Saturday vigil on the Needham Common, but this weekend's memorial event gathered speakers from across Massachusetts and New England, highlighting the Massachusetts Peace Alliance, Gold Star Families Speak Out and Mothers Uniting to Create a Non-Violent and Just World for All Children. Various speakers acknowledged "good cause to celebrate" in the recent resignation of Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld, yet cautioned against complacency.

"As we begin the 21st century...war is still no answer," Rev. John Buehrens, of First Parish of Needham stated, urging attendees to keep the message of peace and the need for change visible in Needham and beyond.

"In the words of Margaret Mead, 'Never forget the power of a small group of citizens to change things. It is the only thing that will bring change'...Perhaps we are smaller in numbers today because of the political changes just this week that we have great cause to celebrate," Buehrens added, referring to the departure of Rumsfeld. "We cannot be complacent. Keep writing. Keep coming to gatherings like this to keep alive the rights of citizens to ask the tough questions. "

The John Kirk Family Band set a mood of peace and remembrance with father John on guitar, harmonica, and voice, son Jackson on a bluesy sax and daughter Catherine and Jackson alternating on piano. Kirk also offered commentary:

"In our family, we have no TV. That's our non-violent act that has made a lot of room for music. I, for one, am very happy right now. This [resignation] was a major shift in the political landscape, but it also says something about the moral bankruptcy of our president that it wasn't the number of dead but the 51 senators that moved him to action."

Sue Hay, founding member of Mothers Uniting to Create a Non-Violent and Just World for All Children, traveled from Keene, N.H., to share her story of grassroots advocacy. Hay also shared a Unitarian Church connection. Rev. Robert Wolf, who was part of Needham's First Parish until 1997, is now at the Unitarian Church in Keene.

"You've come inside on one of the most beautiful days of the fall because we are all grappling with what's next," Hay stated, inviting local mothers to join in creating a Massachusetts branch of Mothers Uniting. "Our mission is to awaken and coalesce what we see as the power of mothers to leverage that maternal love and passion. We must love all children equally. We certainly aren't raising our children to kill other people's children. This is about passion and sweat equity. We flirt with being burned out, but there are children dying of violence and economic injustice all over the world. What could be harder than not being able to keep your children safe? It seems small in comparison to continue to push beyond our comfort zone."

Hay encouraged Needham to write to the new Congressmen and women.

"I thought about the Washington machine they are about to meet," Hays commented. "Let's have hundreds of letters go to their homes to remind them why we voted for them. Let's tell them what we're willing to do personally to stand beside them if they are brave. Our words don't have to be brilliant. Just heartfelt." Hay closed with lyrics from performer Holly Near, urging Needham residents to "Speak your heart, even when

your voice shakes."

Pat Simon of Concord is co-chair of the Massachusetts Peace Alliance's Campaign to Establish a U.S. Department of Peace. "How many people here had never even heard about the Department of Peace until right now?" Simon asked. She related the history of a bill due to be reintroduced again in February to establish a cabinet level Department of Peace on par with the Department of State.

"Many people don't realize that the State Department handles only international matters," Simon said. "The Department of Peace would explore the roots of violence and advise on innovative non-violence strategies. Our approach is not anti-military, but it is to make fighting less necessary. Make peace, make sense, make history. That is our organizing principle." Simon encouraged Needham to consider adopting the Peace Resolution already enacted in Everett and Cambridge.

Melita Arredondo of Jamaica Plain is an active member of Gold Star Families Speak Out, who lost her stepson, Alexander, in the war in Iraq. The Needham peace vigil was her third event of the day, following a memorial event at the State House and Boston's veteran's parade.

Arredondo and her husband, Carlos, focus their efforts on educating non-English-speaking groups on peace initiatives, the war and recruitment strategies. Arredondo tested the Needham crowd on the 'war statistics,' number of Iraqis killed, number of troops killed, number of journalists killed.

"Numbers have power," Arredondo stated. "But I don't understand why these counts are separated. And why is there no number for Afghanistan? Apparently the numbers came out this week in votes. My husband is not a U.S. citizen yet, but our work proves that peace is patriotic"

Sue Fleming and Chris "Chip" Wilder of the Needham Interfaith Vigil echoed the need for continued action and raised voices.

"Our work began in the first Bush war in the 1990s. We had vigils for a long time. We didn't stop that war, but with Bush #2 revving up for war we started again," Fleming related. "We are the diehards, we keep on keeping on. What good does it do? It keeps the issues in front of people. You may think, 'We won Congress. We're on a roll. Things will be fine.' Please, grab the sign of your choice and join us."

Arredondo added. "When you see Old Glory, remember that it is a peace symbol. We have a new wave of activism by families speaking out. There are a lot of us and we are not going to forget. Peace to you."

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