

Bonnie Raines, Activist and Early Childhood Educator

“Teachers and educators must always be activists,” said Peggy Schirmer, co-founder of CEASE, now P.E.A.C.E. Peggy once entered Otis Air Force Base on Cape Cod with another teacher and distributed leaflets warning parents at the child care center about the threats of nuclear war. Peggy never met Bonnie Raines but she would fit into Peggy’s vision of the educator and activist.

Bonnie started out in education as a parent in her children’s co-op preschool. The master teacher there was a great role model about how to work with young children. Working at the parent’s coop led her to seek a MA degree in early childhood education at Temple University. Her friends asked “What? Not elementary education? There is no money in that? Why are you wasting your time?” But she saw the high standards needed in working with young children. She established a child care center at La Salle University for children of employees and families in Germantown, PA, a racially and economically, diverse community. *All this while raising her four children and waiting for the FBI to uncover her participation in the largest heist of FBI documents.* She directed a wonderful place for children 18 months to five years, a place where parents could be trained on parenting as well. These centers also became training sites for many future teachers. Our own Karel Kilimnik, a recent recipient of the CEASE Peace Award and, also, from Germantown, worked for Bonnie. Karel said, “She was always open to new ideas and was very supportive of her teachers.” Bonnie also started an infant care center at the Children’s Hospital in Philadelphia. In the ‘80s she helped design and convert spaces for child care centers and helped family child care providers. She did all this until the late 80s while raising her children and working 60 hours a week.

Meanwhile, she and her husband lived with the possibility that the FBI would uncover their participation in the largest theft of government documents at the time, 1971. Calling themselves ‘The Citizens’ Commission to Investigate the FBI’, she, her husband and six others were determined to show how the FBI was spying on activists groups in the civil rights and peace movements. One day Bonnie tied her hair in a bun put on big glasses and gloves and walked into the FBI office in Media, PA disguised as a Swarthmore College student. Her purpose was to learn the layout of the offices. After that the ‘Citizens’ met in the attic of her home to plan the heist. They left the FBI office with suitcases bulging with confidential files. As they carefully reviewed the stolen documents they found more than they bargained for. The FBI was not only spying on organizations but had targeted private citizens, members of Congress, and celebrities. The FBI spread

rumors and routinely disrupted free speech. The group copied documents and sent them to Congress as well as to major newspapers. Censors at several newspapers stopped the publication but the Washington Post started publishing their findings.

The impact was immediate and powerful. J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, sent hundreds of agents into the field attempting to search for the “burglars”. Their Media, PA action preceded the distribution of the Pentagon Papers by Daniel Ellsberg, the Watergate burglary reported by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, and the Congressional Church Commission’s investigation of covert actions by both the FBI and CIA.

No one knew who these eight were. They took a huge risk. If caught they would spend years in jail for a federal felony. They stayed anonymous, known only as the ‘Citizens’ Commission to Investigate the FBI’. That was until a year ago when their friend and journalist Betty Medsgar told their story in a book, *The Burglary*. Karel Kilimnik said, “We were so surprised to see Bonnie’s picture on the front page of the Philadelphia newspaper.”

Now, in the book, in a documentary film, and in numerous articles much has been presented about the Media action and the lives of the eight. Here is a woman deeply involved in the antiwar movement during the Vietnam war- going to demonstrations, counseling GIs how to get out of the military, in addition to breaking into draft boards and destroying files, and meeting each evening in her attic to plan a break-in of the small FBI office in a suburb of Philadelphia. Although her direct peace movement activity slowed after March, 1971, her involvement in early childhood education gave her daily contact with families. She lived as an activist and an educator instilling values of community, compassion, empathy and humanity. In reflection she says teachers and caregivers of young children have a role and responsibility to create a joyful classroom, with critical thinking, and creativity, to nurture and support diversity and inclusion. This woman, like many early childhood activists, has done so much for children, families, communities, and the world. Changing diapers and reading to young children can lead to taking responsibility for the planet. Bonnie says it better, “When you see things that need changing (like we did during the Vietnam War), we have to act to make that change.” Peggy would have agreed.

Craig Simpson, Somerville, MA

