



photos by DAVID FRANK/staff photographer

Now working in a soup kitchen, Ken Berger left his life as a Redemptorist brother because as a lay person he could "do more ministry with poor people."

'Conspiring for peace' Couple plead guilty in Williams case

Their marriage is based on common goals like peacemaking.

When they danced together in the driveway of Williams International Corp. to protest nuclear arms production, Ken Berger and Pat Robertson were carrying out a joint plan.

So against the advice of their attorney, the Lansing couple pleaded guilty Monday to charges resulting from the Nov. 27 to Dec. 2 blockade of the Wallied Lake defense supplies.

They admitted obstructing Williams' entrance as well as to controversial conspiracy charges which defense attorneys are trying to get dismissed. The charges include conspiring to obstruct the entrance to a place of employment, conspiracy to disturb the peace — outdoors, and conspiracy to trespass.

"I'M VERY happy to conspire to bring about some peace in this world," defendant Robertson told Judge Harold B. Bulgarelli during a pretrial hearing in 52nd District Court, Wallied Lake.

"The act of civil disobedience is not something we went into lightly. We planned it."

Holding hands with his wife during a joint statement, Berger explained their actions at Williams International "were not acts of whim but rooted in our religious faith."

"For us to do nothing in these times is equivalent to us giving our assent to what we consider great moral evil."

BULGARELLI SENTENCED each to \$110 in fines plus court costs and 20 days in Oakland County Jail, which they have already served. He also put them on unsupervised probation for a

year, during which they are not to commit a similar crime.

"I have no doubts as to your sincerity and beliefs, but the court cannot allow you to violate the law," he said.

While surprised by the defendants' guilty plea, Oakland County chief assistant prosecutor Richard Thompson said he respects them for it.

"They did what they did as a matter of conscience and accepted the consequences," Thompson said.

The two were among more than 50 arrested during the Williams protests. The Wallied Lake firm is a target of peace groups because it makes gas turbine engines for low flying cruise missiles.

Williams' 1,450 employees also make turbine engines for cars and trucks, industrial gas turbines and low-pollution turbines for generating electric power from natural gas and coal.

DURING MONDAY'S pretrial hearing, Bulgarelli set a Wednesday, May 8, date for arguments in several of the cases. A half dozen attorneys are volunteering time to handle the many defendants.

Led by attorney William Goodfellow, defense attorneys plan to ask that the charges be dropped on the grounds of double jeopardy and First Amendment right of freedom of speech. They contend their clients are being tried twice for the same crime — once for trespassing and again for conspiracy.

But in a surprise move, Berger and Robertson changed their not guilty pleas to guilty.

Goodman said he advised them a number of legal defenses are available.

THE DETROIT attorney told the judge his clients were "troubled" by the words "maliciously and wickedly" in the charges.

"I cannot say my actions were wicked or malicious. They were out of my concern for the world," said Robertson, 27. A former novice in the Catholic Dominican order, she works in a Lansing migrant ministry.

A former Redemptorist brother who worked with the poor, Berger, 30, now works in a soup kitchen.

As members of Covenant for Peace, a Lansing-based faith community with nine members, both Berger and Robertson helped organize the Advent week blockade. They were arrested the last morning following a "Celebration of Life" in which Covenant members danced, tossed confetti and ribbon in the air, and threw children's toys in the driveway.

"I did plan to disturb people's peace of mind out there — to prick their consciences," Berger told Bulgarelli.

AFTER LISTENING intently to the defendants' statement, Bulgarelli asked why they couldn't complain another way.

Berger said he and his wife coordinated a statewide nuclear freeze campaign and wrote letters to legislators.

But they didn't feel that was enough.

"I think the times we live in are so serious and so scary it demands strong action," explained the soft-spoken Baltimore native.

The judge said the two were pushing their beliefs on others.

"If I'm against abortion, do I go to every hospital that permits abortion and lay in the driveway?" Bulgarelli asked. "You're asking other people to respect your beliefs. Why don't you respect other people's beliefs?"

"I think they (Williams employees) really are good people," answered Berger. "But I think there are some black and white things to be said about nuclear weapons."

When sentencing them, Bulgarelli said he appreciated their statements. "There is no doubt in my mind about your respect for life and sincerity in what you stand for. But my job is to enforce the law."

ALTHOUGH the two did not agree with the guilty plea, attorney Goodman was pleased with the sentencing.

"I think the charges were vindictive and unnecessary," he explained "But I



Active in community work, Covenant for Peace members Ken Berger and Pat Robertson live in the same Lansing neighborhood where they work. The former Redemptorist brother works in a soup kitchen and paints houses. Robertson works with migrant workers.

respect their (his clients) position."

Thompson said the prosecutor's office — which has taken some heat over the conspiracy charges — is just doing its job in prosecuting the cases.

"Our office acted as a commitment to the rule of law even though it's unpleasant to prosecute some of these individuals because they are well-intentioned," explained Thompson.

"The courts are not being vindictive, and neither is the prosecutor's office."

Thompson said it puzzles him that most of the defendants are pleading innocent.

"With civil disobedience, you act purposely because you're obeying the dictates of higher law — and willingly accepting the consequences," he explained.

"Here they are availing themselves of every legal maneuver to avoid that. And that's their constitutional right."

'For us to do nothing in these times is equivalent to us giving our assent to what we consider great moral evil.'

— Ken Berger

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