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Interviewee: Medea Benjamin

Interviewer: Derick Gomez

Date: November 6, 2014

G: Hello, my name is Derick Gomez and it is November 6, 2014. The Samuel Proctor Oral History Program and the University of Florida have the honor of welcoming Medea Benjamin, co-founder of Code Pink and Global Exchange on campus and we're here for an interview. So you've been an activist for several decades now, and it's impossible not to admire your strong code of morality, your strong code of ethics. Can you tell me a little bit more about where that came from?

B: Well, unlike today where the military is volunteer—and it's funny, just coming into here, I saw the students outside with the ROTC and their guns, and they were practicing their different maneuvers with the guns. It made me very sad to see, and I just kind of flashed back to many decades ago when I was in school and there was a draft, and people didn't have a choice. They were forced to go into the military and to be sent over to Vietnam to fight. My older sister, two years older than me, had a boyfriend who was drafted in the military. And he would write her letters. The letters got more and more disturbing as the months went by. And then maybe six months into his deployment in Vietnam, he sent her back a souvenir and it was an ear of a Viet Cong, and he said that this was a souvenir that she could put around her neck and wear as a necklace. I was just so shocked by it, just the whole concept that this nice boy who six months earlier was just one of us, had suddenly turned into kind of a monster in my eyes, who would think that another human being's body part would be a souvenir. I got

involved then, started an anti-war group in my high school, started looking out to connect with other groups. Got involved in politics 'cause I found there was a congressperson who was running for office on an anti-war ticket and I started volunteering on his campaign. So at the age of sixteen, I was suddenly an activist, and I guess I've been an activist ever since.

G: Okay. Do you think that the fact that there's not a draft now makes a lot of the youth more disengaged from anything that's a peace movement and anything that's activism?

D: It makes all the difference in the world. When I was young, the heart and soul of the peace movement was young people because we had a stake in it. Now the heart and soul of the peace movement is people my age; it's people in their sixties. It's Vietnam War veterans and it's been so hard to build a movement. Now I must say that, during the years when George Bush was president, it was easier because there was the effort to drag us into a war not only in Afghanistan, but in Iraq, and there were people who thought, wait, Iraq had nothing to do with the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11. Why are we invading Iraq? And so we gained momentum and we got people out, hundreds of thousands of people out, and that included a lot of young people. But after the U.S. went to war anyway, young people got disillusioned. I remember young people coming up to me and saying, I've been out on the streets like for two years now and we haven't gained anything! The U.S. is involved in the war and so I don't think it's worth continuing to go to protests or to organize on campus. And I thought, wow, you know, it took us a long time in Vietnam to stop that war,

and it's gonna take a long time to stop these wars. But since the youth don't see directly the connection to their lives and they want immediate gratification and it's not there, they dropped out. So now, it's very hard to build up the youth wing. We have in my organization—called Code Pink, which is a play on the color-coded terror alert system that George Bush put in place. It doesn't exist anymore, but it was code yellow, orange, red, and it was supposed to make people aware that there was a more or less danger of a terrorist attack. But didn't make any sense because our government didn't know when there was going to be a terrorist attack. People didn't know what to do when the color code changed, and we thought it was just a way to keep people at a constant state of fear, and that we should have a different color-coded alert system, which is why we chose Code Pink. We said, we have to find the people who attacked us on 9/11 but not invade countries that had nothing to do with it. So we created this Code Pink alert. Today, there is a new crop of young people who have joined Code Pink who said, we have to create a youth movement. And they started out by writing a manifesto called *There is No Future in War* and it's really a very beautifully written document that goes through how the wars are really affecting their lives, but it's hidden from people. For example, they talk about student debt and say, we could all be going to school for free if we weren't spending all this money on war. And they talk about the lack of jobs for young people when they finish college or when they get out of high school and say, we could be creating so many jobs. In fact, there's studies that show that the military is the worst job creator. If you put a billion dollars into the military, you'll only get about eleven

thousand, seven hundred jobs, according to a University of Massachusetts study, but if you put it into education, healthcare, green energy, or any other sector, you'll create, in some cases, twice as many jobs, in some cases even more than that. So they go through that. They look at different ways that militarization of our society has affected youth with the high level of criminalization of young people, the high level of imprisonment of young people, the violence in our society in general and how war contributes to that, and then they end up saying that their generation has basically only known war. That since the time they were aware of things, it's been a constant state of war, and that for many young people, this has become normal. And they say war should not be the norm; peace should be the norm. So they wrote this very beautifully-written manifesto and they've been going out to college campuses and trying to recruit young people to get involved around trying to stop militarization of their campuses, of their local police forces, trying to get ROTC off of campus, and other ways that they're exposing the campus connections to war. For example, the universities, often in their engineering departments, get contracts from the military, and a lot of those contracts are to create more and more new and more lethal weapons for higher-tech wars. Or they find that their campus's endowment fund is invested in Northrop Grumman or Lockheed Martin or some of the major weapons manufacturers. So there's a lot of research to be done on campuses about the connections to what General Eisenhower back in the 1950s called the military industrial complex, which is stronger than it ever was. And students are getting more involved now in finding those connections and seeing ways that they could

try to start moving their universities away from being part of that military industrial complex.

G: Okay. What would you say to students who are disillusioned with the system, since both the Democratic and the Republican Party, the two major parties in the country, both haven't spoken out about drones and both are pretty on the same page about that issue, which, a lot of students have started to rally around?

B: Students, I think in this last election, voted in very low numbers because they've become very disillusioned and cynical, and they see that the two parties aren't all that different. They're somewhat different on social issues, they're somewhat different on how they wanna spend taxpayer money, but when it comes to issues like war, they're both part of the military industrial complex. In fact, it's really better to call it the military industrial congressional caucus. The weapons manufacturers are very smart. They've realized over the years that it's good for them to put some part of their weapons manufacturing in every single congressional district. And that way, if there's threats to cut the Pentagon budget, the congress people will say, oh no, you can't cut that because it will affect jobs in my district. The other thing they do is, they lobby and they give money to the congress people in their districts. So there is this symbiotic relationship between the congress people, the weapons manufacturers. And there's also a very symbiotic relationship between the Pentagon and the weapons manufacturers themselves because they leave government office, they become board members or they get high-paid jobs within the military, not only the weapons manufacturers but the contractors, 'cause that is huge business now with privatization of many

of the functions of the military. I mean, just look under the period of George Bush. The Vice President Dick Cheney was the head of a company called Halliburton that got a five billion dollar no-bid contract, which means nobody else got to try to get this contract before the war in Iraq even started and then afterwards got billions and billions of dollars more. So there's a lot of money to be made and, unfortunately, the Democrats and the Republicans are part of the problem. I would say that we have to look at who has the ear or of the president as well—whether it's a Democrat or Republican, they're briefed daily by the Pentagon. They're constantly talking to their military advisors. Now the military's job is to kill people, to make war. That's to defend the United States, but a lot of times, the way they see defending the United States is through the military lens. That's natural, but there has to be another countervailing force. There has to be somebody else that gets the ear of the president as much as the Pentagon does, and there isn't. That's why we need this grassroots movement of activists who play that role of the countervailing force, who are out on the streets organizing rallies saying, no war, who are in the offices of their congress people saying, spend money on books not bombs, who are calling up the hotline of the White House to say, don't drag us into more wars. So I think that it is unfortunate that both parties are part of the war machine and we have yet to build up a strong, effective citizen movement against war.

G: What is the relevance of the citizen movement, grassroots movement in the age after Citizens United when money has infiltrated the political systems so deeply? Can you talk a little bit about that?

B: Well, it's just one more obstacle in our path. I think we have to see these things not as impediments that make it impossible to make change, but as obstacles for us to overcome. In some ways, I think it's exciting that we have all these obstacles [laughter] and that we have to overcome them. And we will, because citizens' movements are the things that really change history, whether you look at how did slavery end, how did women get the right to vote, how have gays and lesbians gained rights to something that was unthinkable a couple of years ago, which is the right to marriage. It's because of citizens' movements. How did we get an eight hour day in this country? How did we get vacation time? How did we get these gains that workers have today? It's through grassroots movements. There is only really one answer and that is organizing. I think right now it's unfortunate that much of the organizing is done in what we can call silos. There's people who are working on environmental issues, which are critical to whether we're gonna have a planet to live on. There's people working on what you refer to as Citizens United, which is the huge obstacle on money and politics and how do we get public financing of campaigns. There are people that are working on issues of job creation and raising the minimum wage that it's a living wage. There's people who are working on immigrant rights issues. There's people who are working on issues of war and peace. Many of those issues are just so connected to each other and I feel that it's critical to make those connections so that we don't isolated ourselves to say, I am an environmentalist, period. No. I am an environmentalist who believes in a democratic process that shouldn't have money in politics. Who believes that we should spending less money on the

Pentagon and more in finding solutions to our fossil fuel addiction and I also believe that everybody deserves human rights whether they're gay or straight, whether they came to this country recently or decades ago, connect all of these issues to show that we are human beings that care about the future of our planet and care about each other. If we do that, we will feel that we're part of movements for social justice that are connected to each other and I think we'll just be a lot more effective in the way that we organize.

G: Okay. I know one of the big criticisms of the Occupy Movement was that it was unfocused. How, when you're trying to combat so many issues, such a broad palate of issues, how do you remain organized? How do you remain cohesive in the vision towards a better future?

B: I think by building coalitions where you have groups that are working on one piece of the pie. My passion, I might say, would be money in politics, and so I'm really focused on that, but I'm part of a larger coalition of groups that are working on different issues. We saw it come out in a beautiful way in North Carolina in what has been called Moral Mondays, where people have realized that these issues need to be connected. They met every Monday and brought the issues together in a physical place outside of the state's capital. That's one way to do it. Others are to form peace and justice coalitions that are citywide, that are statewide. I moved to Washington, D.C. about five years ago after my children had finished college. They weren't in the house anymore and I said, I want to focus myself full-time now on activism, and I make sure that as my activism—because I have the luxury now of being able to do it full-time—that I connect the

issue in my work, so that I put most of my focus onto the issues of war and peace. But I also am involved in local things around Washington, D.C. like gentrification, where so many of the black families that have been there for decades are now getting priced out of living in their own city. I put energy into environmental issues. Just this week, people came to town from around the country who were involved in fracking, and I went out at seven o'clock in the morning every day to their demonstrations to make sure that I was there to say, right on! It was a lot of young people, and it really made me cry to see them blocking the entrances of the Federal Energy Commission and locking arms and getting arrested. I think that's our future, and what a privilege it is for me to be there in support of that movement. So I think, really, by many different ways that we can show our support if we think about it in holistic terms.

G: Okay. And there's the issue of police intimidation of movements. I know that you personally have experienced a lot of police intimidation both here and abroad. How do you remain motivated when you have the police and the military often trying to crush movements?

B: I have had many problems both at home and overseas in terms of police brutality against peaceful protestors, or military who are just killing peaceful protestors in some of the countries that I visited. It's something that scares away a lot of young people. I think it's important that we force our police to see us as the community that they're there to preserve and protect and not as the enemy. One thing is to stop the militarization of our police forces. I get absolutely disgusted when I see these tanks, these MRAPs in our communities. I mean, I get livid, like I want to

jump off my bicycle or out of my car and run over there and stand there and you know, stop, get out of here! We should not accept the militarization of our police forces. We should not accept police abuse of peaceful protestors. We should not accept police shooting down young men, especially men of color in communities around this country. We have to get involved as citizens, to have citizen review boards of police activities, to change policing policies. And in the meantime, I feel like in Washington, D.C. since I have been there, I have actually formed good relationships with the police. And that has helped a lot in trying to stop them from arresting us in brutal ways, in treating us fairly. Many of the police are my friends. I mentioned how I was just out at seven in the morning in front of the Federal Energy Commission and the Chief of Police was there and he said, Medea, I haven't seen you in a while. I saw that you're a grandmother now, congratulations. Would you like to see the pictures of my grandchildren? And he takes out his phone and he shows me the pictures of his grandchildren, and this is like five minutes before he's gonna order the arrest of these young people who are blocking the entrance. We had a good laugh and we hugged each other and I said, this is the way it should be. The police should be people who are members of our community, who protect us when we need protection, who yes, remove us when we are sitting there doing civil disobedience and we know we're gonna get arrested. But they really should be our friends. I also saw an amazing action that was put on in Ferguson, Missouri where Michael Brown was so brutally killed by the police. It was a protest in front of the police station. And there the police had been known for being so abusive, particularly of the black population. Instead of

going there and yelling and screaming at them, which I certainly understand and would do were I a young person who had been so abused in that community—but but this was put on by the faith-based community. What they decided to do was to go up and form a line in front of the police at the police station and they would talk individually to each police person and tell them stories. It was one of the most amazing protests I've seen because they would tell them stories of what was happening in the community. The police were there sort of stoic, like, you're not gonna break me. The way these reverends, rabbis, and Imams were talking to the police, telling them, I heard this story about a young family where the young man just went out to get some milk and bring it back home and he was stopped by the police. And they go through the story of what happened, that that young man is now in prison, that young man was the one who actually was paying for his grandmother's apartment. She can no longer afford to live there, and really personalizing this, and I saw police start crying. I saw police break down, I saw their jaws quivering while they were hearing these stories and the tears rolling down their eyes, and I thought, you know, that is power. That is powerful. So storytelling, as you know, is very powerful. Humanizing things is very powerful, and treating each other as humans is really powerful.

G: Okay. What suggestions would you give to someone who's young and angry to move past that and to try, perhaps different approaches like the one that you just said? Sometimes I know that things can seem very desperate and that there's no other option besides throwing a rock. What would you say to someone who has a rock in their hand?

B: I would say that I totally understand the anger, I don't have any great love of private property. There's been property destructions since the founding of our country. The tea party dumping the tea overboard: that's property destruction. But I would tell people to think about whether it's building a movement or it's hurting the building of a movement. When you think about it, most of the things like taking a rock and throwing it into a—whatever—McDonald's, Starbucks, at a police car. It usually is giving the media what they want in terms of focusing on the movement as a violent movement. It oftentimes makes people afraid to come out and join, especially people who want to come out who might have immigration issues, can't be arrested. Who might have issues that they want to bring their family out, their children out and don't feel like they can without putting their kids at risk. I think we want to build movements where people can feel like if they want to be with the group doing the civil disobedience, they can chose to that. But if they want to be with the group that's not doing civil disobedience, they can choose to do that as well. I think we wanna build movements that are seen as taking the moral high ground. So I think it's important to have the conversations about, does property violence, does the angry mode build or not? That's not to say that I don't get really angry sometimes and do things that I later regret doing because the emotion is there, because we're passionate; we care about these issues. But sometimes it's good to take a moment, reflect. I think music is really important in the movement. When I'm in a situation where I feel myself getting really angry, like I want to take somebody and shake 'em, I start singing. I find that the singing calms me

down and it calms down the people around me and that it changes the mood, and it really is a helpful thing. We've seen singing in Civil Rights Movement. It was such an integral part of that movement. If you look at the South African Anti-Apartheid movement, singing was central to that movement. In fact, they sang in five part harmony which was really something glorious to listen to. But we should do a lot more singing in our movements.

G: Okay, so you brought up a little bit of historical social movements. What are some of the heroes that you have from some of those movements and just in general that help guide you and help you move forward with what you've been doing?

B: Well, sometimes the heroes tend to be people that we know about, like the Nelson Mandela types. But I think more of ordinary folks that I've met through the work I've done who are not well known but give me so much inspiration. For example, there was a woman named **Elvia Alvarado** from Honduras who I met when I was researching the wars that we're waging in Central America. And she had gotten picked up by the U.S. military there, she was put into prison and was tortured. I heard about the story and I went down to meet her and I found out she was actually an activist, a poor peasant woman whose main goal in life was to get land that wasn't being used into the hands of poor people who didn't have land, so they could grow their own food. In doing this, she was risking her life on a regular basis because the landowners, even if they weren't using the land, didn't want anybody to take it over, and police were in the pockets of those landowners. So this is a woman who has never used a computer, has never had

a cellphone in her life, and she is one of the most amazing organizers that could get hundreds of poor people out at three o'clock in the morning to a piece of land that she had discovered, getting those people out by word of mouth. At three o'clock—and I've been out with her—suddenly sees herself surrounded by all these people, so that when the police and landowners would come out, they'd be confronting hundreds of people including children and old people and families. Sometimes it would work that that large presence would keep the police from just coming in and shooting at people. She has had her share of horrible things in her life. Her daughter was shot, her young children before she was an organizer died from malnutrition, and she's seen many of her colleagues shot. I would say to her, how do you keep coming out day after day and doing this? Don't you get depressed? And she looked at me and she said, I don't have the luxury of getting depressed. I don't have the luxury of stopping. I have to do this because we're trying to feed ourselves. We're trying to keep our children alive and that has really nourished me for many years now, where I think I shouldn't have the luxury of getting depressed. I shouldn't have the luxury of taking the day off or taking a vacation. I should have that same burning sense of mission that Elvia Alvarado had and it does keep me going.

G: Wow, that's an incredible story. That was really powerful. I know that your background was for a while in NGOs and international aid organizations. How did that help create the person that you are today?

B: Well, I always thought when I was young that hunger was just appalling. How could we have these supermarkets full of food but there were people going

hungry? I studied public health and nutrition and I thought I would go around the world teaching people or helping people to feed themselves, and I realized as I went around the world that mothers know how to feed their children. It's really just a question of, do they have the land they need to grow the food? Do they have the jobs they need to make the money they need to pay for food? And that a lot of that is political. So I started to recognize that it really is about how we organize our societies. I think those aid organizations are like Band-Aids. Important. I mean, you cut yourself, you want a Band-Aid, but it's not going to stop people from getting the wounds. If you are constantly pulling people out of the lake and helping them to get resuscitated, at one point you wanna ask, who's the bastard that's throwing these people in the lake? That takes to you into the much larger questions. So I got disillusioned working through NGOs and the United Nations and wanted to work more on the larger political issues. But I still believe that humanitarian aid is very important. I would say, though, that we have allowed the NGOs to take the role of institutionalizing change and it doesn't do a very good job of it. To make change, you need the kind of passion that the Occupy Movement had, which is, I'm not doing this because somebody is paying me to do it. I'm not doing this and then at five o'clock I say, okay, time to go home. I'm doing this because I'm passionate about this and it's passion that makes revolutions. It's passion that makes social movements tick. In some ways, NGOs take away the brightest, most passionate people and put them into these nine-to-five jobs. So I left the NGO movement and I helped to create Code Pink because I wanted to work with people that do this work because they are

committed to change. I understand that people need jobs. Well unfortunately, sometimes you gotta take the job as a waitress and do this stuff at night and the evenings. But if you're passionate, you're gonna find a way to do it. Live collectively. Live simply. Find ways to make time in your life so that you can do the activist work. But I think NGOs in some ways are part of the problem, and that people should find ways to do this work separate from being part of a hierarchical, paid and not paid NGO movement.

G: You brought up how the NGOs and the international aid organizations kind of take a little bit from the activism side of it. You've personally said a lot about how Obama being elected took a lot out of the peace movement. Can you talk a little bit of activism, especially anti-war activism in the Obama era?

B: Well, during the Bush era, we had a large movement, a huge movement. I mean, even Code Pink, we never even wanted to become an organization. We thought we were gonna do a couple actions, government was gonna change its mind and we'd go onto our other lives. Instead, we found that we had hundreds of thousands of people that wanted to be part of just our group alone. We had three hundred thousand people on our mailing list before we even knew what to do with the mailing list. We had over three hundred Code Pink local groups without even saying, we wanna go out there and create these local groups. It was just people felt a great desire to join up not with just our organization, but any peace group they could find. Obama came in and it all just fizzled. People thought, okay, he's going to take care of things. He's gonna get us out of Iraq, he's gonna be a peace president. They were so glad to get rid of eight years of George

Bush. Also, then the economic crisis happened and a lot of people found themselves more concerned about domestic issues: saving their homes, student debt issues, working to save other people's homes. A lot of things happened, but the result was that there wasn't a peace movement anymore. And part of that is because the Obama administration was very smart. They continued the policies of the Bush administration but they did it in different ways. Instead of more boots on the ground, they started using drone warfare, killing people by remote control. But it meant that it was done in secret. Most Americans didn't even know that we were killing thousands of people in places we had never declared war, like in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia. That's why I got involved in researching drone warfare, writing a book about it, and then going out around the country to hundreds of cities and talking to people about it. And I think we actually managed to do a number of things. We managed to change public opinion that was very favorable towards drones to becoming less and less favorable. We managed to force the government to start talking about this secret program and admit that civilians were being killed. Change the policies so that at least they're trying to kill less civilians. But it still is secret wars that are going on which makes it much more difficult to organize, and now we have a horrible group, ISIS, that is out there beheading people and massacring people who don't go along with them. So a population in the United States that had become very anti-war after thirteen years of endless wars has suddenly switched and become pro-war again, supporting the bombing of Syria and Iraq. It's almost like we have to start all over again to build an anti-war movement, to go out and tell people, look, ISIS is

terrible but this is not the answer. This is counterproductive. It's actually justifying ISIS by saying, look, we're fighting the West and the war against Islam and they're gaining thousands of more recruits once the U.S. started bombing. We have to show people that the weapons the United States is putting into the mix is actually ending up in the hands of extremist groups like Al Qaeda affiliates and ISIS, and we have to promote political solutions. Unfortunately, I think people tend to say, oh, you're so naïve if you think there can be political solutions. We have to say, look, you're naïve if you think there are military solutions. Just look at what's happened over the last thirteen years. We haven't eliminated extremism, we've actually help proliferate all over North Africa now, all over the Middle East, morphed into different groups. And we really need to go back and build a movement that's based on forcing our government to push for the political solutions like forcing our allies, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, to cut off funds to these extremist groups, to stop the weapons being sent to these groups, to stop the recruits from getting there. Go back to the negotiating table that was happening in Geneva between the Syrian Government and the rebels. The solutions are political and that's where we need to build a movement that puts pressure on the government to find these political solutions.

G: Do you see there ever being an end to the war that the United States is currently in, especially when the authorization of use of force that was signed into effect by George W. Bush thirteen years ago was so ambiguous and allows for just the continuation of war for such a long time? Do you see this ever ending?

B: Well, now we're gonna be faced with a new authorization for the use of military force that's gonna be debated in Congress, and they probably will go ahead giving Obama another green light that will be a green light that will be continued to the next presidential administration, whoever that happens to be. So it's very dangerous, giving all of this authority to a president and having a Congress that really has done very little to try to use the checks and balances that it's supposed to have. In fact, it's supposed to be Congress that declares war, not the executive branch. So it's part of what we the people have to do, is to say that we want a Congress that acts as a check on the executive. We want a Congress that acts as a check on the state of perpetual war. We want a Congress that cuts the budget of the Pentagon and puts it into the life-affirming activities that we need to improve the lives of citizens. We just had an election where the majority of people said that they don't feel that their lives are improving and they blame it on the party in power: the Democrats and Obama. What we need to say is that we can't improve the lives of the people while we continue to spend over fifty percent of our discretionary funds on the military. That has to shift and that money has to go into things like infrastructure projects, green energy, things that will actually move our country into a positive direction and make people feel like their future can be better than the future of their parents, which is not what this generation feels right now.

G: I think that's a really good point to finish at. I think that was really great. Thank you so much. That was great.

B: Thank you so much, it was a pleasure.

G: It was a real pleasure.

[End of Transcript]

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