

# **THE WISDOM OF CRAWFORD**

*By John Warren*

Unconditional Theatre is investigating the experience of activism. We've been interviewing Bay Area activists for several months, asking about the roots of their involvement, moments when they decided to push themselves past their comfort zones, and the personal impact of the 2004 election.

Then we heard about Cindy Sheehan. If we wanted to interview activists, we realized we'd better head to Crawford, TX.

My collaborators Kim Fowler, Ashley Boyd, and I spent a week in and around Camp Casey with microphones in hand, interviewing anyone who would talk to us. Our starting point was the anti-war protesters, asking about their experiences in Crawford, what compelled them to come, and how they first engaged with activism. We also crossed to the other side to speak with their detractors, in order to hear viewpoints from the other side. We returned home with forty hours of audiotape which we're currently developing into a play. In the meantime, I wanted to share some of my own first-person observations. I returned deeply inspired by much of what I saw, and with many of my political assumptions shattered. The conclusions I've come to still surprise me.

## *A COMMUNITY OF INDIVIDUALS*

In Camp Casey, I met "Walking Mary", a 65-year-old woman with a mane of white hair, who had walked across the continent in a march for nuclear disarmament. Here she was in Crawford, flat on her back with a wet towel over her face, staving off impending heatstroke, apologizing for the bunions and sciatica that now slowed her down. But there was nowhere else on Planet Earth that she wanted to be.

I met Maia, a Texan member of Code Pink, wearing a large pink cowboy hat and a pink slip emblazoned with the words "Fire Bush". (Pink slip, get it?). Maia is a Buddhist who identifies her lineage not in ethnic or national terms, but as a lineage of protest, spanning many generations of outspoken women before her.

I met Kathleen, a peace activist who had long been part of the Catholic Workers movement. She'd been to prison hundreds of times, for sitdowns and trespassings that spoke truth to power. She went to prison each time with the absolute assurance that her actions were making change in the world, whether or not she saw it in her lifetime. Her contributions to Camp Casey included helping out in the kitchen and saying rosaries for fallen soldiers with her old friend Martin Sheen.

I met Johnny Wolf, one of the founders of the Crawford Peace House. In 2003, he bought a little house near Crawford's single traffic light, to serve as a site for interfaith worship and alternative press conferences. In his words, "For eight hundred dollars a month, we could confront the leader of a superpower." Without the Peace House, Cindy Sheehan's protest may never have gotten traction. As soon as she arrived in the area, they were able to provide water and tents, and serve as a hub for communications and transportation of supporters. Johnny was at the center of it all, with an arresting smile and a zen-like calm. I asked him if he ever lost hope. "Never." He told us that they shut off their phone for lack of funds just days before Cindy arrived, and now a month later they're part of an internationally recognized phenomenon and paying off their mortgage. I asked him if he feared for his own safety after the

protesters left town. He responded that if it was his time to go, then it was his time to go. He is a Quaker with an unshakable faith in divine providence and the wisdom of the great circle of humanity.

Speaking as a liberal agnostic living in the San Francisco Bay Area, I was deeply struck by the central role of faith in Crawford. By faith, of course I include the evangelical Christianity of many Bush supporters, for whom Jesus plays a central role in their activism. But I saw faith in equal measures on the anti-war side. Faith in the same Christian God, with an emphasis on the teachings of mercy and brotherhood. Faith in the inexorable rightness of pacifism. Faith in a liberal value system that prizes shared responsibility and open dialogue. Faith that the actions of a lifetime of work, in connection with many other lifetimes of work, might bear fruit in a world that looks quite different for our children's children.

### *PROTEST & COUNTER-PROTEST*

A filmmaker named Patricia helped us trace the evolution of the camps. She had been out there with Cindy from the very beginning, and asserted that the haphazard, organic growth of the protest was one of its surprising strengths. Each day, new strategic ideas were floated by new voices in the camp, and the protest careened along. When Cindy had to leave for several days to be by her mother's bedside, there was consternation about how it might weaken the protest, but it ultimately gave other parents of fallen soldiers the opportunity for limelight and leadership. The unique role that women played, particularly in their role as mothers, made this a special sort of phenomenon. A model for a new, life-affirming matriarchal society. People were inspired to do things they wouldn't have imagined before their arrival. Two different couples held wedding ceremonies in the camps. Story after story of people pitching in wherever they were needed. The pride on people's faces as they bragged about being on "latrine duty" -- doing their part to support the protest and bring the troops home.

The camps started when Cindy Sheehan walked along a Crawford road toward George W. Bush's ranch and the local authorities told her she couldn't walk any further. The place where she sat down sprung up as a Camp Casey I, with Cindy and a handful of supporters camping out in a ditch by the roadside. Eventually, they planted a row of crosses and began adding the names of fallen soldiers, as more and more people arrived to sit with her in solidarity. When the owner of a nearby ranch shot off his shotgun in preparation for "dove hunting season", the man's cousin offered an acre at the corner of his own ranch a couple miles down the road. This became Camp Casey II, ironically closer to Bush's ranch than the original ditch. While another plot of crosses and a large circus tent with a stage and sound system were erected at Camp II, the original campers maintained their presence at Camp I, as the symbolic center of the protest. Over the last weekend of the camps, they estimate that 10,000 supporters passed through.

As the camps grew, local Bush supporters felt pressure to make their own voices heard. Gary Qualls, the father of a fallen soldier in Iraq, erected Fort Qualls, a pro-war encampment behind the Yellow Rose, a memorabilia store boasting the "World's Largest Bush Selection". The fort included a memorial to his son, several crosses liberated from Camp Casey, and a consistent soundtrack of patriotic music. Large banners declared "We will not quit. We will not fail. We will prevail.". This fort provided an in-town gathering place for supporters of the war, a counterpoint to the Peace House.

At Fort Qualls we met William and Velma, a Texas couple with an air of self-assurance. They passed out business cards stating, "We don't take it kindly when some out-of-state bitch comes here calling our friend and neighbor, George W. Bush, all sorts of names and blocking our roadways." William was constrained to

a motorized scooter, suffering from the effects of carbon monoxide poisoning, but he came out in the heat each day, washing down his medication with warm Coke and making his opinions known.

Other townsfolk chose to build a camp directly across from Camp Casey I, where Cindy had first sat down in the ditch and planted the row of memorial crosses. They named it "Camp Reality". I spoke with Steve, the brother of a soldier currently serving in Iraq, who was one of the original builders of this camp. He stated his support for the anti-war protesters to stand up and speak their minds, but declared the need for a visible response. When the idea for the camp had dawned on him, he spoke with his brother in Iraq, who gave his blessings. Camp Reality was Steve's way to honor his brother's service and to try to support the success of his mission.

At first, there had been mingling between the two camps. The folks at Camp Reality needed to use Camp Casey's port-o-potties, and they shared water in the 100-degree weather. There existed a begrudging respect for the other side's dedication in facing the elements to take a stand for what they believed (even if the Camp Reality folks did go home to sleep in their own beds each night, while Cindy's supporters kept up their vigil by sleeping in nearby tents.)

Between the two camps was a triangle of grass which had been converted into a sort of demilitarized zone by the local sheriffs. Everyone we spoke with praised the local law enforcement for their handling of the whole situation, of dealing fairly with all parties, and arresting those who got out of line no matter what their ideological affiliation. However, the need for safety had shut down all dialogue, and some people (including one of the officers guarding the zone) lamented their role in keeping the sides apart. Anyone who approached the intersection was asked "What side are you on?" and then was ushered to one side of the road or the other. By the final weekend, one member of Camp Reality waved a sign reading "Repent you unpatriotic scum!", so I have no doubt that security had indeed become necessary.

Meanwhile in San Francisco, a KSFO radio personality launched a caravan to Crawford, titled the "You Don't Speak for Me, Cindy" Tour. They drove through the Southwest, encouraging rallies and picking up people along the way. The caravan arrived in Crawford on the final Saturday of the camps, to coincide with a rally of folks from around Texas, amassing 2,000 people on the local football field.

After the rally, Bush supporters drove slowly by both Camp Caseys, gawking and taking pictures as the folks in Camp II held up a long banner reading "Support Our Troops, Bring Them Home". A twelve-year-old girl on the line commented that she felt like an animal in the zoo. Many of the cars waved signs: "We Support the President", "Bush is Cool!", "The 60's Are Gone - So Why Are Y'all Still Here?", "Cindy Go Home!", "Cindy Sheehan Sucks Ass!", and my personal favorite "Free the Crawford 700!" (referring to the population of the town).

Each passerby who catcalled was met with a smile and a two-fingered peace sign. Trained conflict mediators stood nearby, reminding the folks on the line, "Don't react! Don't react! We don't want any trouble!"

A Gulf War veteran named Dennis who was part of Cindy's initial ragtag band of ditch campers stood at Camp I next to the red, white and blue Veterans for Peace bus, emblazoned with the words "Impeachment Tour". A passing driver retorted, "You've got to be kidding!?" He responded simply, "No, we're not kidding, we're down for peace! We love you!" Dennis is currently traveling the country to educate the public on the effect of depleted uranium on his fellow Gulf War vets. I asked him if he considered himself an activist, and he responded that the word wasn't strong enough.

At Camp II, I spoke to a volunteer named Cheryl with eight slashes on her nametag (indicating the number of days she'd spent in the camps). She told us of a couple who had pulled up, and the wife leaned out her window to ask whether this camp was "for or against the troops." Cheryl replied, "We're for the troops." The woman smiled. Cheryl continued, "But we're against the war." Ultimately she invited the woman out of her car and they continued the conversation. The woman eventually handed Cheryl a letter she had written to Cindy, explaining the ways that Camp Casey was hurting our troops. The letter was unsigned. A small crowd had gathered and some people jeered the woman, saying that they wouldn't deliver the letter unless she had the courage to sign it. Cheryl took them to task, and pledged to deliver the letter whether it was signed or not. However, she suggested that future dialogue could only be possible if Cindy knew who to contact after reading the letter. Eventually the woman did sign it, and included her phone number. I have no idea if Cindy ever called her, but I hope so.

We asked everyone we interviewed what they'd like to ask people on the other side. Much as it pains me to feed the stereotype, most of the Bush supporters replied "nothing" or "I know everything I need to know about them." Sometimes they asked simply, "Why won't they go home and leave us alone?"

On the other hand, most of the anti-war protesters did have real questions for the opposition: "When would they find it acceptable to protest the government?" "Are there any circumstances under which they would pull out of Iraq?" "Did it bother them that we entered this war on false pretenses?"

The Camp Casey dwellers welcomed dialogue without showing weakness. They showed me that you can indeed be solid in your beliefs and yet willing to hear divergent voices. That we can appreciate and honor our common humanity while remaining steadfast in our absolute disagreement on the necessity of war.

### *LOOK NO FURTHER*

Every person we spoke to saw proof of their success. The Camp Casey dwellers referred to copycat vigils cropping up in cities across the country. The Camp Reality folks gestured to the road in front of them, where the great majority of signs on passing cars supported the war. Members of the Peace House pointed out the need for ever larger buses to shuttle people out to the camps. Each side referenced different polls, showing a spike in Cindy Sheehan's "negative impression" numbers or a rise the number of respondents opposing the war. Each side alternately accepted or brushed aside the validity of certain polls and news sources.

Even the war itself was open to interpretation, with incontrovertible proof on every side. The people manning Fort Qualls passed out pictures of grinning Iraqi children surrounding U.S. soldiers, accepting candy or giving thumbs-up to the camera. In Camp Casey, a veteran gave us a first-hand account of soldiers who scattered candy in the dirt to make Iraqi children crawl on their bellies for it. On the Left, we are intimately familiar with accounts of soldiers sent into battle without body armor or contractors wasting tax dollars while our soldiers are underpaid. But from folks on the Right, I heard over and over that when anti-war protests are reported in the press, the number of attacks on our troops increases -- that the Iraqi insurgents are emboldened by our actions. On the Left, however, we perceive the reverse, that attacks on our troops lead to increased anti-war activity back home.

Cause and effect is a funny thing. Facts can turn on their heads depending on the order they come in.

The volunteers in Camp Casey II's makeshift kitchen told us story upon story of food arriving from anonymous donors. One hundred pounds of buffalo meat from a local rancher. A guy who drove from Houston with a truck full of ice. Someone calling a restaurant in the next town, asking them to deliver a stack of pizzas to "the woman in the ditch". A founder of Food Not Bombs loading up his decrepit bus and driving a thousand miles without turning off the engine, for fear of its faulty ignition. The amount and variety of food was proof of support for our cause.

But down the road in Camp Reality, reports of our big buffets were proof of the lack of grassroots in our movement. The food must have been donated by MoveOn or George Soros, and we were all living high on the hog under our big circus tent. As buses shuttled Cindy's supporters past, the members of Camp Reality called out "Eat well!"

As long as each side can find total solace and justification in its own facts and conventional wisdom, then there's no incentive for dialogue. People on the Right increasingly tune in to Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Anne Coulter, Michael Savage, and Fox News for information they can trust. On the Left, we turn more and more to NPR, Air America, Michael Moore, Robert Greenwald, AlterNet, and Daily KOS. The freedom of information that the internet affords is a double-edged sword. As our sources of news become more narrow, balkanized, and antagonistic, the less space there is for interaction and common ground.

This informational divide terrifies me more than anything else. It threatens to send each side deeper into its own vortex and create the conditions for some form of civil war. We must find a way to fight this.

On the Left, we pride ourselves on our dependence on facts, hoping they will somehow break through the ignorance that enables the actions of the Bush administration. But the Right does not view itself as a bunch of irrational zealots. They have their own facts and photos, from sources they find far more trustworthy than our own liberal, "axe-grinding" media. Where we see proof of Iraqi hatred of our militarism, they see media sources that refuse to print the good news of rebuilt schools and electrical lines. Where we decry the irrationalism of the Religious Right agenda, they counter with the logical inconsistencies in our anti-war and pro-abortion stances. Where we see a legitimate rejection of the Bush administration's foreign policy, they see sour grapes over last year's election.

And they're not completely wrong.

With liberalism on the political ropes, I often spend my own time poking holes in conservative positions, offering up generalized references to the first amendment, the need for a social safety net, or the separation of church and state as my core beliefs. Nitpicking and vagaries are clearly not enough for these perilous times. We need to address our inconsistencies.

While we hail Cindy's authentic identity as the mother of a fallen soldier and consider her morally unassailable, the residents of Camp Reality believe that she is being willingly used by such vilified organizations as MoveOn. From their point of view, the election of a president by three million votes places George W. Bush in an even more unassailable moral position. Many of his supporters told us of their trust in him, that he has access to foreign intelligence and information that we do not, and they seemed quite willing to receive this information on a need-to-know basis. They found it arrogant that we on the Left presume to have all the facts available to us.

An anti-war protester named Mitchell told me about a recent conversation in a nearby Texas town. A couple asked him for directions and they fell into a cordial conversation. At some point, they asked Mitchell

what brought him to town. He mentioned an anti-war protest, and they responded that if he didn't support the President, then they didn't want to continue talking with him.

George W. Bush is dividing us. And we must resist.

### *TAKING RESPONSIBILITY*

Difficult as it may be, we need to engage with people on the other side. Not just at election time. And not just with slogans aimed at passing cars. Walking Mary explained to us the difference between verbally engaging with clear-cut opponents "in the heat of revolution" and engaging them in interactive problem-solving. Both are important, and perhaps we do not spend enough time on the latter. If what I saw in Crawford is any indication, many Bush supporters are not interested in such dialogue. So we must try even harder to engage them in it.

Of course we must focus on the people who are not already radicalized, who are not yet entrenched -- who can share their own thoughts in a spirit of conversation, not simply provocation. Sometimes we must take the advice of those mediators on the Camp Casey line, who urged "don't respond". But sometimes we must take a chance to speak with people who are indeed opponents and respond to one another constructively -- to share views from the heart, not in an effort to convert anyone, but in order to demystify one another's thoughts and fears.

This is a big shift for me. As recently as a month ago, I was throwing up my hands and referring to "those people" in simplistic terms. I felt that if they wanted to support a bloodthirsty maniac who's making enemies all around the globe, ignoring the most vulnerable members of our own society while running up insane amounts of debt, then there was nothing to discuss with them. But the personal connections I was able to have with people on all sides of the Crawford protests has changed my thinking. The people at Camp Reality are no longer faceless lunatics from some other planet. Their names are Steve, Lucy, William and Velma. I don't agree with any of the conclusions they've come to, but I know that I can have a civil conversation with them.

I know that the microphone I carried afforded me a special opportunity to approach people. Protesters on both sides saw the chance for their voice to be heard. And holding a microphone to their lips forced me to listen in a way that I never had before. We must look for other such opportunities.

In Crawford, my collaborators and I were some of the very, very few people who crossed the lines. The police saw our microphones and ushered us back and forth across the divide. I tried to be honest about my own political leanings, which was difficult when I spoke with people in Camp Reality or Fort Qualls. They were understandably leery of my intentions. I admitted to them that my audience is Bay Area liberals, and sometimes I was honest enough to admit that my sympathies lay with the anti-war campers. I hope when they spoke to me with that understanding, that I opened up a window from our side.

Believe me, each time I heard someone declaring support for the Iraq War based on factually debunked myths like "they attacked us on 9/11", it made my stomach turn. I cringed in disbelief when I heard one man say that "God placed George W. Bush on the throne of the presidency." But at least I was standing there, making eye contact with a fellow American, not shouting, respecting that they cared enough to stand in the 100-degree heat to participate in the life of their country.

Back in Camp Casey II, I met a veteran named Deb, standing by the road to Bush's ranch after nightfall. Armed with a flashlight and reflective vest, she was charged with the futile task of directing local pickup trucks to slow down to ensure the safety of campers by the roadside. Deb is a registered Republican, horrified by Bush's brand of fiscal irresponsibility and colonialist overreaching. Horrified enough to spend a week camping out with a bunch of lefties, protesting the actions of the leader of her own party. She called herself an Eisenhower Republican and hoped to see the GOP return to its traditional responsible roots. The Democrats had done nothing to convince her to change her party registration, with what she considered our opportunism and lack of principled consistency. She still held on to her political faith. While she chose not to "out" herself as a Republican too often, she felt welcome in the camps as an ally in the anti-war struggle. Deb and others who are willing to cross political lines for what they believe may be the best hope for our country. We must keep finding comfortable ways for them to cross those lines.

An elderly veteran named Archie showed me a picture of himself standing in the center of Baghdad holding an olive branch. He was part of a delegation of Veterans for Peace who visited after the first Gulf War. Archie is a large man, and he looked awkward with this delicate branch, as he offered it out to the camera. It reminded me of my own gesture, holding out my microphone as an offering. The mic provided me with an excuse, a reason to approach, with the possibility that I might actually listen to folks with whom I disagreed. Listen to their love for family members serving in Iraq. Listen to their fears of an uncertain future. Listen to their deep need to take pride in their country.

I do not mean to romanticize the worldview of those who believe that attacking Iraq was a good idea. But I do mean to humanize it. To seek the ways that one might come to that conclusion without being some sort of monster. We can value human interaction with our detractors and still remain completely grounded in our own beliefs. Indeed, this may be an essential part of the struggle.

Since my return home, I have attempted to share my experiences in Crawford with friends who share my political leanings. I cannot defend the positions of the Bush camp, but I have found myself asking friends not to place these people into an easily labeled box and toss away the key. To open our minds to the possibility that their positions are perhaps more complex and informed than we often give credit. I disagree with their pro-war stance, but they offered me their personal stories and honest beliefs, so I have a responsibility to treat them with care and respect.

Unconditional Theatre now has a treasure trove of interview material documenting the experience of Crawford, and we need to figure out how best to use it. While in the camps, we dedicated ourselves to collecting stories instead of helping out in the kitchen or doing latrine duty. We felt that we could provide a valuable service by documenting the phenomenon for people who weren't there. Now we have a duty to use this material to spark dialogue, to bridge gaps between viewpoints, and to inspire people to get politically active. We want to engage our community in that work. And we hope that this will be one of many efforts around the country to carry on the spirit of Camp Casey.

### *CINDY'S LEGACY*

The anti-war protesters told us over and over that Camp Casey would be the turning point, the galvanizing moment where the tide of public opinion turns against the war. People said that this encampment was "history in the making". They said they simply "had to come", and spoke of a "pull" in almost metaphysical terms. Visitors came from as far as Japan and Australia. Some people drove through the night to bring gifts or simply give Cindy a hug, only to get back on the road so they could return to work on Monday.

Many people in the camps intoned the experiences of the Civil Rights Movement. They invited comparisons between Cindy Sheehan and Rosa Parks. Ms. Parks even sent words of support to Cindy, giving the comparison added credibility. Rosa Parks was not in fact the first Black woman to sit down at the front of a bus; nor was Cindy Sheehan the first mother to question why her son died in Iraq. But each woman placed herself in great personal peril, spoke from her own authentic identity, and had a network of activists ready to support and magnify the impact of her actions. This is where the personal and political intersect.

Only time will tell whether the name of Cindy Sheehan will resonate through the ages as a catalyst for social change. The story that my collaborators and I traced was not directly about Cindy. Rather, it was about the people who showed up to support or refute her, who came out to participate in the life of their country without personally receiving national recognition. It is in them that the future lies.

### *WHERE WE GO FROM HERE*

There are ways for all of us to assist in Cindy's struggle. I know that some of the folks who camped out in Crawford have moved to Louisiana to provide support and supplies to the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Many of them plan to follow Cindy to DC for the big anti-war protest on September 24th, and a possible sustained vigil by the White House. I'm sure the movement will continue to develop and grow.

If you're so inclined, seek out such organizations as Veterans for Peace ([www.veteransforpeace.org](http://www.veteransforpeace.org)) or Gold Star Families for Peace ([www.gsfp.org](http://www.gsfp.org)), to stay on top of developments or find out what help they need. Or discover your own way to engage with the issue, to start conversations with family, friends, or even complete strangers. Please let me know if there's a role that you think Unconditional Theatre can play in educating people or fostering dialogue through the stories we collected.

I had to agree with a large sign that the pro-war folks had posted at Fort Qualls: "Evil prevails when good men do nothing". I hope that all who are reading this will stay informed and get involved in whatever way feels most comfortable for you, whether you share my politics or not.

Thanks for reading,

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