

CODEPINK INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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CODEPINK Announces the Seven Delegates Going to Bayreuth to Receive the 2016 Wilhelmine Tolerance Prize

CODEPINK WOMEN FOR PEACE Activists Plan a Speaking Tour in Germany April 7th – 19th.

March 1, 2016 — On Monday CODEPINK announced the names of the seven delegates who will travel to Bayreuth, in the German state of Bavaria, to receive the 2016 Wilhelmine von Bayreuth Prize for Tolerance and Humanity in Cultural Diversity on April 15th.

The Bayreuth prize of 10.000 euros (about US \$11,000) will be received by CODEPINK members Toby Blomé, Martha Hubert, and Barbara Briggs-Letson of California; Leslie Harris of Texas; Josie Lenwell of New Mexico; Elsa Rassbach of Colorado and Germany; and Ann Wright of Hawaii.

CODEPINK, Women for Peace, is an internationally recognized U.S. peace and civil rights organization that has previously received numerous awards, including the prestigious Aachen Peace Prize in Germany in 2014.

On February 24th, the members of the City Council of Bayreuth voted to confirm that Bayreuth will hold a public ceremony to bestow the 2016 Wilhelmine Prize on CODEPINK on April 15th. The city council members had already voted nearly two years ago, on the recommendation of the University of Bayreuth, to grant the 2016 award to CODEPINK, and in June 2015 the city issued a press release announcing the award.

But in February, articles published in The Jerusalem Post had sparked debate in the German media about Bayreuth granting the award to CODEPINK. In his articles for the Post, journalist Benjamin Weinthal, a research fellow with the neo-conservative U.S. Foundation for the Defense of Democracies headed by former CIA Director James Woolsey, criticized the participation of CODEPINK co-founder Medea Benjamin in a conference in Iran in 2014. Mr. Weinthal also asserted that CODEPINK denies the right of Israel to exist, which CODEPINK spokespersons have repeatedly repudiated.

CODEPINK, along with many other organizations such as Jewish Voice for Peace in the U.S. and Germany, supports the Palestinian-led international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement with respect to the Occupied Territories and advocates a consumer boycott of products made and sold by Israeli firms using resources like Dead Sea salts that belong to the Palestinian people. CODEPINK recently joined Jewish Voice for Peace in a call to boycott vacation apartment rentals by airbnb, which markets temporary lodgings for tourists in the illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Bayreuth's mayor, Brigitte Merk-Erbe, received some letters of complaint but also many letters from CODEPINK supporters in Germany, the U.S., and elsewhere, also from prominent German Jewish spokespersons, and the CODEPINK delegates themselves wrote letters to the mayor.
(http://www.codepink.org/letters_to_mayor_brigitte_merk_erbe)

After the Bayreuth city council members had reviewed the documents provided by CODEPINK, and following a lively debate in the city council meeting of February 24th, a majority of council members voted to reconfirm the commitment to bestow Bayreuth's 10,000 euro award in 2016 on CODEPINK, Women for Peace, in a public ceremony on April 15th. At the meeting on February 24th, not one member of the Bayreuth City Council spoke for revoking the award to CODEPINK as the mayor had proposed.

The CODEPINK delegate to Bayreuth from New Mexico, Josie Lenwell, a photographer and psychotherapist, wrote in her letter to Mayor Merk-Erbe: "At least half of the delegation coming to Bayreuth is Jewish. We all lost family in the holocaust and we are the grandchildren and great grandchildren of the survivors of the holocaust. How could we deny what happened? We stand with the Jewish people and the Arab people. We stand with all people and we oppose any attempt by one group to oppress another. As Jews we have a long and sad history of oppression and genocide. As Jews we will not use our oppression and genocide to justify oppression of another. We oppose Zionism knowing full well Zionism is not Judaism. No group of people has priority or superiority over another."

CODEPINK's Ann Wright, a retired U.S. Army Colonel and former U.S. diplomat who is coming with the group to Bayreuth in April, reiterated: "CODEPINK has never made statements denying the right of the State of Israel to exist. But we do insist," said Colonel Wright, "that Israel stop its illegal policies in the West Bank and Gaza. We are firm that Israel must adhere to international law and also implement true equality for all its Jewish and Arab citizens. Many Jewish Israelis advocate the same positions."

Asked about the conference she attended in Teheran in 2014, Ms. Benjamin said that, contrary to what Mr. Weinthal had implied in his Jerusalem Post articles, she definitely did not attend the 2006 Iranian government-sponsored conference to which Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was president of Iran from 2005 to 2013, invited Holocaust deniers.

"I have traveled to Iran three times," said Ms. Benjamin, "always on missions to advocate tolerance and diplomacy. At the 2014 conference, where I was invited to speak about my new book on Drone Warfare, I traveled with U.S. scholars working on the Iran nuclear deal, something that CODEPINK has been actively supporting. I spent my time in Iran talking about the importance of coming to a deal so that the people in the region could avoid another disastrous war. We believe in people-to-people diplomacy," she explained, "and as with all other diplomacy, we do not assume that all people we meet will necessarily have all the same viewpoints we do. Certainly if I were to encounter a Holocaust-denier, I would definitely tell that person in no uncertain terms that such ideas are outrageous, untrue, dangerous, and also very painful to Jewish people and many others; likewise I would argue against any racist I met in the United States."

Elsa Rassbach, CODEPINK's spokesperson in Germany, recalled that following the vote in the Bayreuth City Council on February 24th, she stopped by Mayor Merk-Erbe's office to convey that CODEPINK looks forward to working with the mayor, the city, and the university to ensure the award ceremony on April 15th is a success. "I thought the mayor seemed genuinely pleased at my tolerant attitude," said Ms. Rassbach, who was a public television executive producer in the U.S. and is now an independent documentary filmmaker and freelance journalist.

Wilhelmine Tolerance Prize laureates include Madjiguène Cissé, founder of the Women's Network for Sustainable Development in Africa; Hassan ibn Talal of Jordan; and the Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim.

In conjunction with traveling to Bayreuth to receive the award, the CODEPINK delegates are planning a speaking tour in Germany from April 7th to April 19th. "All of us in CODEPINK, and so many here in Germany, are eagerly looking forward to productive discussions about how U.S. and German citizens, as well as citizens in countries everywhere, can work together to bring about a more just and peaceful world," said Ms. Rassbach.

Details regarding the tour will soon be announced.

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES written by the seven CODEPINK delegates are attached below.

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AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

CODEPINK, WOMEN FOR PEACE DELEGATION TO GERMANY, APRIL 2016

The three members of the delegation designated by asterisks (*) will be the speakers throughout the tour that will begin in Cologne (April 7-8). The remaining members of the delegation will join the group in Berlin on April 10th. The entire delegation will thereafter be together in Berlin (April 10-14), Bayreuth (April 14-16), Kaiserslautern/Ramstein (April 17-18), Stuttgart (April 18-19) and other places.

* TOBY BLOMÉ is an organizer with San Francisco CODEPINK. In 2009 Toby began organizing the continuing annual weeklong protests at Creech AFB in Nevada, where the U.S. Air Force uses armed Reaper and Predator drones for illegal targeted killing in Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan and Somalia and elsewhere, including killing for the CIA. At Creech in March 2015 CODEPINK was joined by four other peace organizations for a "Shut Down Creech" protest. 150 activists from 20 different states, including over 50 war veterans, participated. In 2010 Toby also initiated the monthly two-day protests at Beale AFB, a military surveillance base with Global Hawk drones in California. In 2012 Toby and Ann Wright traveled to Pakistan with 32 other Americans as part of a CODEPINK peace delegation to meet with victims of U.S. drone attacks. Toby is a retired physical therapist and former teacher. She mothered two Turkish-American children in a cross-cultural marriage and lived and worked in Istanbul. These experiences helped foster her deep concern about the impact of the US "War on Terror" in Muslim countries.

BARBARA BRIGGS-LETSON is a peace-activist grandmother, retired nurse and lay-midwife. She has met with drone victim families in Pakistan and knows, deeply, about "collateral damage" from US drones. She has protested drone training and piloting at Creech USAFB in Nevada and Beale USAFB in California, and she has spoken against US drone policy with the acting US Ambassador and with Pakistani military officials in Islamabad.

LESLIE HARRIS is a grassroots activist and organizer and Coordinator for CODEPINK Greater Dallas, the North Texas Light Brigade, and Veterans For Peace Chapter 106. As an educator and mother of three residing in Texas, her alarm over the policies of George W. Bush as governor and then as U.S. president propelled her into the peace and justice movement. She is an Advisory Board member of the Dallas Peace Center, a founding member of the North Texas Civil Rights Project, and one of the "Dallas Six," a group of citizens involved in legal actions to protect free speech.

MARTHA HUBERT is an activist with San Francisco CODEPINK. She maintains a weekly vigil in downtown San Francisco, focusing on peace and justice issues such as Black Lives Matter, Climate Justice, Stop Mass Incarceration, Free Chelsea Manning, Free Mumia Abu Jamal, Stop Bombing Yemen and Stop Killer Drones. She has been an organizer and protested multiple times at Beale and Creech Air Force Bases, where she was one of the 34 arrested last spring, her second arrest at Creech. Martha studied art and architecture and made her living as an artist for many years (marthahubert.com). Her focus was printmaking, and later, painting. She also volunteers in a residential treatment center for low-income residents of San Francisco suffering from AIDS and is part of the San Francisco Threshold Choir, an initiative of women who sing in hospices and end of life situations (thresholdchoir.org).

JOSIE LENWELL has been an antiwar activist since the Vietnam War. Based in New Mexico, she is a long-standing member of CODEPINK, "a grassroots peace and social justice movement working to end US -funded wars and occupations, to challenge militarism globally and to redirect our resources into health care, education, green jobs and other life-affirming activities." Articles on her life as an activist, photographer and psychotherapist are included in the book "Remarkable Women of Taos."

* ELSA RASSBACH is a co-founder of the German Drone Campaign network ("Drohnen-Kampagne") and helped launch discussions about the German government's role in supporting illegal U.S. drone killings via AFB Ramstein. Inspired by participation in CODEPINK protests at AFB Beale and AFB Creech, she was also with CODEPINK on the Gaza Freedom March in Cairo in 2009 with the delegation to Gaza in 2012. Elsa was born and raised in the U.S.; her father left Germany in 1938. As a student at the Berlin film academy in the late 1960s/early 1970s, she worked with GIs in Germany resisting the Vietnam War. She had a 20-year career as a public television producer and independent filmmaker/screenwriter in Boston and New York and is best known for her award-winning work to bring the history of American labor and struggles of black people to prime time U.S. television. Since the 1990s she has also accepted filmmaking and journalism assignments in Germany. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, peace activism became her top priority. She works with several U.S. and German organizations, including CODEPINK, UNAC (United National Antiwar Coalition), DFG-VK (the German section of War Resisters International) and attac.

* ANN WRIGHT is a 29-year veteran of the U.S. Army/Army Reserves and retired as a Colonel. She also served as a U.S. diplomat for 16 years in US Embassies in Nicaragua, Grenada, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sierra Leone, Micronesia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. She resigned from the U.S. government in March 2003 in opposition to the Iraq war. In her letter of resignation she mentioned her concern over the unbalanced U.S. policies on Israeli-Palestinian issues. She has protested the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq, the unlawful U.S. military prison in Guantanamo, Cuba, challenged the Israeli blockade of Gaza as a passenger on the 2010, 2011 and 2015 Gaza Freedom Flotillas, the use of assassin drones, the persecution of whistleblowers and U.S. militarization of the world. She is the co-author of "Dissent: Voices of Conscience." She has protested at the key U.S. drone base, Creech AFB in Nevada, and been arrested for civil disobedience there.