

A President Visits Guilford, Maine:
Excerpts from an Interview with Sue Griffith
Voices from HOME Oral History Project

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My name is Sue Griffith and I live in Parkman, Maine. We had word that the President would be coming to Maine, and I remember hearing that on the news and absolutely never considering it would be Guilford, Maine or the toothpick mill [Hardwood Products Company] that he would come to. But sure enough, I started to get some messages on my phone. "Can you believe this? Can you believe this?" Governor Janet Mills here in the state urged that during a pandemic, during this time of protest, maybe it wasn't the best time to plan a trip like that, and it made the President push a little harder. He absolutely insisted that he would come on a certain date. It didn't matter that it was graduation night at the local high school, where they are trying to hold a graduation outdoors anyway due to the pandemic. He was going to come. And the Secret Service showed up in town. The helicopters showed up in town.

I became involved because the local Unitarian Universalist Church [of Sangerville and Dover-Foxcroft], my church, had a Facebook page where we started to get some inquiries about, "Would the church be open? Would the church be a presence counterprotesting?" What should have been a visit from the President to thank the workers at the mill became a defacto Trump rally. And he had chosen a very red part of the state, a very Republican part of the state, to come and visit.

The background of this toothpick mill--by making medical supplies, it turns out they were the only domestic manufacturer of the swabs that could test for COVID-19. The medical side of the mill, it's a sister company to the toothpick mill, it's called Puritan [Medical Products]. They were working nonstop. They were working steady shifts. They worked, you know, twenty, thirty, forty days in a row without a day off. I have worked at the toothpick mill. I have worked both making the popsicle sticks and tongue depressors, in what's called the "old side" of the mill, and also in the newer, medical side of the mill. So, I could definitely understand the feeling in town of the mill finally getting its due, and

that the President was coming to town to thank the folks at the mill. That did feel good to a lot of people.

My experience during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic--as the pandemic did reach the United States, I was pretty naive to the fact that what was now a concern in Italy would shut down our schools. But that's what I experienced on March thirteenth. A teacher workshop day was rescheduled. We were kept in our own buildings instead of going to a neighboring high school, and our students never came back for the rest of the year.

Not only was there a pandemic going on, but Ahmaud Arbery had been murdered already in Georgia, and there was video of this murder. And his murderers--even though they were on video tape and police had that in their evidence chain--they were allowed to walk free, claiming that they were standing their ground. Claiming that he had broken into a house. And none of that really holds up. In May, George Floyd's death was also videotaped. And that just seemed to be one step too far. That the whole country reacted to how the police officer watched the camera, and just absolutely felt there would be no repercussions with his actions. Because of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, and then the Black Lives Matter movement responding to that, President Trump couldn't travel anywhere in the country. The protests were overwhelming. They became international. Unfortunately some violence happened, and is still happening.

Because of the scandals--all the turnover in the Trump administration has been unbelievable. People that he appointed and called "the best of the best"--he's had them removed or fired. We have had several secretaries of defence and secretaries of state and national security advisors. To me, I feel like we're really in a vulnerable spot. We pulled out of the Paris Accord, we pulled out of the TPP [Trans-Pacific Partnership]. We've insulted NATO. Nancy Pelosi really said it right when she said, "President Trump, with you all roads lead to Russia." The corruption wasn't stopped by the impeachment, but all of that--I just absolutely knew that I would be out there alone if I had to be.

There were lots of threats on social media. Threats as to, if Black Lives Matter shows up here, this is what's going to happen. So, the threats were geared towards rioters and looters, which is what people were seeing on television. The threats took on that racial tone as soon as Black Lives Matter came up. And the gun culture here in rural Maine is such that you knew the threats weren't empty threats. But what I was seeing on our Facebook page were requests from churchgoers who wanted to protest the President's visit. And they wondered: Would there be a cooling station? Would there be water available? Was there a map available of the area? How far a walk would it be? Where could we park?

I did my best to answer some of those questions, and to find more information. But placing phone calls to the town office and to the local sheriff's department, I did not get responses. Calling a second time, I did get to speak to people. And they were intrigued by this, and they certainly didn't want elderly people walking into town being overcome by the heat. But when I was promised that somebody would call me back, of course there was no call back. And by that time it was Thursday, June fourth. The president was coming the next day.

Protesters were told to go protest in Dover, the next-door town, or to protest in Bangor when the President's plane landed. But for a lot of folks, they knew that they were being kept out of the way. They were being sent elsewhere. I was hopeful that this could be a moment for our church to be there for folks who weren't as enthusiastic about the President's visit. Personally, a lot of us wanted some kind of response like a candlelight vigil. But during a pandemic, in a UU church that is mostly senior citizens, we could not come together and really discuss or plan. A few folks were able to gather at the church and make signs together. We made some of the signs thanking the "Swab Squad," the folks at the mill who were making the swabs. That was the whole reason for the President's trip.

The next day, about half a dozen folks gathered at the church for a short, mile-and-a-half walk to where the presidential motorcade would leave the local high school, travel to the mill, and then back again. The high school soccer field became the chosen, preferred landing spot. From there to the toothpick mill is probably about a mile's drive. We knew to expect them about three o'clock in the afternoon. For the protesters, we all took a knee when we heard the choppers, when the motorcade went by. But we felt solidarity together for the counter protesters, and the Trumpers were definitely loving the noise and the show of force. The state troopers were giving an escort, so sixty troopers on motorcycles were escorting the President's motorcade. They got a huge reaction from the crowd as they kind of strutted their stuff. And it was the same for the choppers.

But the people who were there, where I was protesting. We were a few of us, a half dozen of us from a local Unitarian Universalist church, but we were surrounded by folks who had traveled from Southern Maine mostly. Veterans for Peace. There were educators. A school principal complimented my daughter and my friend who stood there all day in that heat, wearing masks, holding up signs that said "Enough is Enough." Those girls, when they were encountered by Trumpers, they were told to get a job. They were told to get off welfare. And these are girls who are at the top of their class, who

have held jobs for years even though they are just teenagers. But the assumptions that were made were disappointing.

As I walked along what locally we call the Braeburn Corner, I was so relieved. I had not planned to meet anybody until eleven o'clock. But people had been there since seven a.m., nine a.m. People had traveled from local towns like Brownville and Willimantic. They came with "Black Lives Matter" signs, they came with signs about truth, they came with signs about all the scandals in the administration. And despite the heat, they held onto that corner. They were the presence that he would see--in a packed half-mile of Trump supporters and Trump merchandise, this one corner was held visibly.

As his motorcade went by, law enforcement did their best to step in front of the protesters and block that view. So Trump saw very little of the counter protesters. We were definitely outnumbered. Probably ten to one. But we were visible. As much as the Trumpers wanted to support their president, and support the work of the mill, I think the rest of us were there to make sure that our hometown didn't go down in history as supporting the racist legacy that this administration is going to have.

There definitely was some tension. For most of the day, people were very polite. Our signs did not say "Black Lives Matter" specifically, and I think some people didn't know what our signs meant. But we had signs that said, "Truth Matters," and the Trumpers seemed to like that. When they saw the "Truth Matters" signs, they agreed with us, which we found a little confusing. We also carried "Grab 'Em by the Ballot." We were making light of Trump's own quote that came out before the 2016 election, when he used an expletive, "grab 'em by the--" But Trumpers seemed to like that too. "Grab 'Em by the Ballot." They thought that was supporting Trump. I guess they didn't recognize the reference.

But our signs that did get recognized: "Ahmaud Arbery," "George Floyd," and "I Can't Breathe." Those signs drew a different reaction. Some people just grew silent and walked away. Some folks called us the enemy. Some folks told us, "Keep your masks on; you're ugly." "Keep your masks on; you got bad breath." Probably the worst: When the motorcade had gone through to the mill, a lot of Trumpers started to leave town. And one woman saw our sign "I Can't Breathe," and she took her entire--to move just fifteen feet past us took quite a while. And she took that as a chance to yell all kinds of insults and challenges to that position. Mostly, aborted fetuses, she argued, could not breathe as well.

Here in Piscataquis County people feared that it would become violent. The local credit union didn't open that day. A lot of people felt like it wasn't safe to be in town that day. I

felt like, you've got to be realistic about this. It could become violent. My teenage daughter said she wanted to be there, which surprised me, but I absolutely did not want to discourage her from being there. I really felt it was that important to stand up to what this administration had been doing, and to take a stand for the truth. My teenage daughter was told that she would have to stay with her mother for the day, which is not something she's been told for a long time. I put together some first aid supplies. Her father has a building in town, his shop is where he works most days. That was the go-to plan, if things got out of hand she knew where she was supposed to be. And she was to be with me most of the day. We also had some vehicles not too far away, a short walk. We would be able to get into a vehicle and hopefully get out of harm's way. So I felt like there were enough options to get out of harm's way that we could be there to express ourselves.

The biggest concern I had, there were a lot of folks who were armed. Trump supporters gave way to two different sections of what I'll call Black Lives Matter/counter-Trump supporters. I was pretty psyched to be in a spot that was in a lot of shade. And with my teenage daughter with me, I felt like we were in a pretty safe spot. Some bikers pulled onto the grass next to us and they were all armed. Just--they had pistols, wearing holster open-carry style. Very clear about the fact that they had their weapons. And then there were some folks with Trump flags and American flags with AR-15s, just kind of walking back and forth. Making sure--there was a little bit of challenge to space there at the side of the road. The flag pretty much hit us every time they walked by.

The law enforcement was local sheriffs and state troopers, a lot of visiting sheriffs from surrounding counties, and a lot of border control. When counter protesters were challenged for being on the sidewalk and asked to move back, and then Trumpers were allowed to remain on the sidewalk in front of them, that was the only kind of negotiation I saw. With patience and persistence the Trumpers drifted off and the counter protesters reclaimed that curbside. But I was a little disappointed to see that law enforcement, pretty much elbow-to-elbow, stood in the street and blocked the view of a lot of the counter protesters as the motorcade went by. But that's their job. That's the security they had to provide. And if it helped keep things calm, I guess I'm glad for it.

Maine is a constitutional carry state. It was legal to have those weapons on display and openly carried. But guess I don't think that's what the Second Amendment means. To me, the words "well regulated" are right in the Second Amendment. "In order to maintain a well-regulated militia, the right to bear arms shall not be infringed." So I was not comfortable with that display of force. None of the counter protesters felt a need to carry a weapon openly.

On June fifth, in Guilford, Maine, the counter protesters were predominantly wearing masks and social distancing as much as they could. And the folks who were there to support the President in his visit were not. Luckily the President's visit did not lead to an increase in the virus. Unfortunately, his next big rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, did. And one supporter, Herman Cain, even attended that Oklahoma rally and now has passed away from the virus. So that connection did happen elsewhere, but so far in Maine we have been lucky in the summer of 2020 to keep the numbers low.

The feedback has been, I think, quiet from the folks who are Trump supporters. Which there is still--in this part of the state of Maine--there is still a lot of support for him. I guess the New England sensibility of "we'll agree to disagree" is in full play right now. But at our church I think there was a lot of coming together. People who were older and not up for that crowd--or not going to put themselves in that crowd during a pandemic--I think there was a lot of appreciation that somebody was there. The folks who worked at the mill went through so much security and so much overtime to accommodate that visit, that I think they took it a little more personally if they found out somebody was protesting. But I was usually able to find a way to say, you know, "Boy, the President should have been here just to thank you, but I think he was here to have a rally because he couldn't have his rallies anywhere else." I think that was also understood.

A lot of folks left town as soon as the motorcade had gone to the mill, and it was a lighter crowd that remained as the motorcade returned to the helicopters and as the helicopters left. But that was about the time that a lot of more counter protesters were able to show up from Bangor or Dover and there was a huge feeling of solidarity and relief. I wish personally that we could have opened up our church for a candlelight vigil afterwards. I think there would have been a lot of people to share the emotion of that week. But of course, the pandemic prevented that. I was very proud of the folks who were able to get out there that day and make sure that we could thank the folks at the mill, but we weren't going to give our town to that president.