

Food Not Bombs founder lives his philosophy

June 9, 2011 By Susan Jacobson, Orlando Sentinel

As he was arrested, Food Not Bombs co-founder Keith McHenry said, "We don't fault the city of Orlando for being in this dilemma, because it really is a national problem. There needs to be a national solution."

For Keith McHenry, feeding the homeless and working poor is a way of life.

Homeless himself except for a 1987 Chevrolet van in which he sleeps, McHenry gave up promising careers in graphic design and marketing to crisscross the country, spreading the gospel of compassion for the poor.

Last week McHenry, co-founder of Food Not Bombs, and two other people were arrested at Lake Eola Park, accused of violating Orlando's ordinance regulating mass feedings. It was one of about 150 times that McHenry, 54, has been arrested while promoting the cause to which he has devoted his life.

"We want to get rid of capitalism or at least alter capitalism to the point where it's humane," McHenry said. "There's no reason people should be living in the streets and coming to soup lines in the wealthiest country in the world."

In the same park where thousands of Tea Party activists have rallied in recent years to denounce socialism, Orlando Food Not Bombs volunteers ladle out vegan fare and rouse political sensibilities Monday mornings and Wednesday evenings.

In April, a federal appeals court ruled against the group, saying the city could regulate the meals.

Mayor Buddy Dyer and the Police Department have vowed to enforce the law, which limits groups who feed more than 25 people at a time to two permits per year at each park within a two-mile radius of City Hall. Five Food Not Bombs members were arrested Wednesday and four Monday as the group handed out meals at the park.

Volunteers don't want to rotate the meals among parks. They want to feed people at Lake Eola, a downtown showpiece, to shed light on what they view as an inequitable political and economic system.

McHenry drove to Florida from Taos, N.M., in his brown and gold van packed with literature, pots, water jugs, tables, a solar stove and his bed. Sporting a full beard reminiscent of his old hippie days, McHenry is in his element when persuading college students to join the fight or being interviewed about transforming the world into a fairer place.



His goal is to pressure the public and elected officials to divert spending from the military to basic human needs such as food, education, affordable housing and health care.

Orlando is a flashpoint because other Florida cities are debating similar regulations, he said. He wants to draw a line here.

"We don't fault the city of Orlando for being in this dilemma because it really is a nationwide problem," said McHenry, who wore a Food Not Bombs T-shirt he designed with a purple fist grasping a carrot. "There needs to be a national solution."

McHenry moved around the country as a youth as the family followed his father's job as a park ranger. He went to high school in Utah, where he organized a strike against a principal he considered authoritarian.

His activism accelerated in Cambridge, Mass., where he and seven other people founded Food Not Bombs in 1980. The organization now includes chapters on every continent except Antarctica.

"He's very passionate about his cause," said Mitzi Tharin, station manager at Sun Sounds of Arizona in Tucson, a radio station that reads to the blind. McHenry was marketing director there several years ago.

In Cambridge, McHenry began taking vegetables and fruit too imperfect to sell at the organic-produce store where he worked and giving them away to a homeless shelter and kids in public housing. Near the project were two tall glass towers that cast a shadow from a weapons-design lab. That was the inspiration for the name "Food Not Bombs."



FOOD NOT BOMBS

P.O. Box 424
Arroyo Seco, NM 87514 USA
1-800-884-1136
www.foodnotbombs.net

Feeding Resistance: Food Not Bombs Members Arrested in Orlando for Serving Meals Without a Permit (Democracy Now! June 24, 2011)

The City of Orlando, the home of Disney World in Florida, is being sued in court today over a city law that has effectively made it illegal for any group to feed more than 25 people at a time in downtown parks without a permit. It also limits groups to no more than two permits per park, per year. The group Food Not Bombs has refused to obey the new law—saying food is a right, not a privilege—and has continued to serve free meals to the poor and homeless. However, over the past month more than 20 members of the organization have been arrested. Keith McHenry, who helped found Food Not Bombs over 30 years ago, was arrested Wednesday and remains in jail. We speak with Benjamin Markeson, an activist involved with Food Not Bombs for several years who was arrested earlier this month, and the group's attorney, Shayan Elahi.

JUAN GONZALEZ: The City of Orlando, Florida, the home of Disney World, is being sued in court today over a city law that has effectively made it illegal for the group Food Not Bombs to serve free meals to the poor and homeless. Over the past month, more than 20 members of the organization have been arrested. Keith McHenry, who helped found Food Not Bombs over 30 years ago, was arrested Wednesday and remains in jail.

The City of Orlando recently began enforcing a law that makes it illegal for any group to feed more than 25 people at a time in downtown parks without a permit. It also limits groups to no more than two permits per park, per year.

AMY GOODMAN: Food Not Bombs members have openly resisted the law by continuing to feed the homeless and poor without a permit.

Joining us from Orlando is Benjamin Markeson, who has been involved with Food Not Bombs in Orlando for years. He was arrested earlier this month. Also with us is Shayan Elahi, an attorney for Food Not Bombs.

Can you lay out the lawsuit that you are filing today, Shayan?

SHAYAN ELAHI: Well, Amy, this morning I'm filing an injunction against the City of Orlando. Our goal is to basically have them follow an administrative order, signed by Judge Belvin Perry, which basically says that anyone who violates a municipal ordinance can be just given a notice of appearance instead of showing up or being arrested and hauled off to jail. That's one component of it.

The second component, and a very essential one, is that this mayor has decided that he can actually suppress dissent by deleting a First Amendment exemption from the trespass warnings. So, you just mentioned—Juan just mentioned that Keith McHenry is in jail right now. He's in jail because what this mayor did was he deleted a First Amendment exemption that was on the trespass warning, and so he was able to basically re-arrest Keith and put him in jail without bond at this point. So I think it's a very troubling development in this nearest struggle against Food Not Bombs, that he's taking it very personally. So, I'm moving the court to stop him from doing so.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Well, Benjamin Markeson, the Mayor of Orlando has labeled you and others "food terrorists"?

BENJAMIN MARKESON: That's right.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Can you explain the Mayor's logic, as best as you understand it, and what precisely were you doing when you got arrested?

BENJAMIN MARKESON: Well, I don't know what the Mayor's logic is. All I can say is that we think that it's terrorism to arrest people for

trying to share food with poor and hungry people in the community to meet a community need. And all we do is we come to the park and we share food with poor and hungry people. I don't know how that qualifies as terrorism.

AMY GOODMAN: When you were arrested, what were you doing, Benjamin?

BENJAMIN MARKESON: Well, I wasn't actually in the park. And that day, I hadn't actually ladled out any food. I was on a sidewalk adjacent to the park.

AMY GOODMAN: And what happened?

BENJAMIN MARKESON: The police came up and arrested me and charged me under the City of Orlando's Large Group Feedings Ordinance, the one that requires a permit.

AMY GOODMAN: And the significance of Keith McHenry being arrested? Keith, who comes from the Bay Area, founded Food Not Bombs 30 years ago—

BENJAMIN MARKESON: Right.

AMY GOODMAN: —came down to Orlando. Is he still in jail?

BENJAMIN MARKESON: Yes, he is. He may be there until July 5th, when he has his first appearance on his food sharing arrest.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And precisely what argument was used when this ordinance was passed?

BENJAMIN MARKESON: Well, they were contending that the food sharings caused problems with cleanup, and I think they also were concerned—I think their basic logic was that the food sharings cause problems with cleanup and attract too many people to the park. But we share in the Lake Eola Park picnic area, which is the area that was designated for food sharing and food consumption. And when we first started sharing at Lake Eola Park, we were in a different part of the park, and we cooperated with the city and the police and the park rangers by moving to the picnic area. And less than a year later, they pass this ordinance to essentially shut down all food sharings at Lake Eola.

AMY GOODMAN: Now, a case that is getting a tremendous amount of attention is the case of Casey Anthony. Shayan Elahi, this is happening in the same courthouse, your filing of the lawsuit, and it involves the same judge?

SHAYAN ELAHI: Well, it is happening in the same courthouse, and it involves the same judge in the sense that he's the chief judge of the circuit. And he's the one who signed that administrative order that I'm moving the court to enforce. So, basically, I don't know if the case will land in front of him. We hope that it does. But he is a crucial part of this.

Amy, I would also point out that a lot of this battle that happened six years ago, when [inaudible] was coming through, was about gentrification of downtown. The downtown started to—the Mayor started the development board for downtown Orlando, and his whole goal was basically to push everybody who was, you know, the other, according to them, out who was not—you know, who didn't fit their idea of who should be in downtown.

And we're trying to point out to the Mayor that times have changed, that now everybody is hurting, and a lot more people who come to Food Not Bombs food sharing are working poor. And this mayor just doesn't seem to understand that. By the way, I will add that I am filing—

AMY GOODMAN: Shayan Elahi, we're going to have to wrap there, but I want to thank you for being with us, attorney for Orlando's Food Not Bombs, and Benjamin Markeson, an activist with the group.