

Talking Truth about Military Recruitment

by Kate Connell

[Join Kate Connell online in November to talk about Truth in Military Recruitment. See <https://westernfriend.org/event/truth-and-military-recruitment-nov-16>]

When the Military Selective Service Act was reinstated in 1980, requiring mandatory registration for a military draft, I was a college freshman, draft age. I am not a veteran or a man, not an educator or a lawyer. But from my perspective as a woman – and later as a parent – I saw that the young men in my life were not getting the support they needed to make educated choices about military enlistment, and consequently, they were vulnerable targets for military recruiters.

Because of this, in solidarity with my male peers, I leafleted against mandatory draft registration. But back then, I was more interested in art and music and socializing with my friends than taking a deep dive into activism. It wasn't until a decade later, when the first Gulf War broke out, that I got seriously involved in draft counseling.

I was living in New York City and a member of the Fifteenth Street Friends Meeting when the war began in 1991. Many peace activists were shocked and unprepared for this act of U.S. aggression. I was one of those people suddenly woken up by my country's overt jump into war. I was serving on the meeting's peace committee and contacted the War Resisters League (WRL) for guidance. In collaboration with WRL, the meeting hosted a draft counseling training for the community. The workshop was publicized on the local Pacifica radio station and that Saturday, 450 people filled the meetinghouse to capacity, ready to learn how to counsel people vulnerable to a military draft.

I remember asking everyone in that room to pause for a moment of silence in the Friends' tradition, thinking they might be uncomfortable, but a few seconds wouldn't kill them. When we all settled in, I opened one eye and saw everyone had their eyes closed; the room was hushed and solemn. It was a remarkable moment that I have kept close to my heart for times when I feel disillusioned about humanity.

In 1997, my family moved to Austin. I became involved with Nonmilitary Options for Youth (now Sustainable Options for Youth), doing counter-recruitment work in the schools – tabling and making classroom presentations

about the myths and realities of military careers. I learned a lot about the hard facts of military life, including sexual harassment and the near total control the military has on the life choices of recruits. Some of the students got pretty angry at us for questioning the military, but others asked how they could get out of their Delayed Enlistment Program agreements.

From these conversations, I felt the thrill of discovery. Talking truth with youth is like finding gems in the rough, exposing vitality in the sometimes seemingly slumbering zone of public education. It has been these conversations – with youth, veterans, parents, immigrants, workers, and people working for justice for their communities – that have compelled me to continue this work. I discovered my leading while doing it, not before.

*Then I thought,
“Why was there a recruiter
in his Freshman Seminar Class
at all?”*

In 2011, we were living in Santa Barbara, and my son was a high school freshman. He told me one day about how he had challenged a Marine recruiter in his Freshman Seminar Class (devoted to learning about careers). At first, I was impressed that he felt brave enough to question a military recruiter. Then I thought, “Why was there a recruiter in his Freshman Seminar Class at all?” This recruiter was not just standing at a table in the hallway; the recruiter was interrupting my son's education.

After reaching out to other parents and doing some research, I learned that under the federal No Child Left Behind/Every Child Succeeds Act, schools must provide military recruiters the same access as college and job recruiters in order to receive federal funding. Schools often interpret this as unrestricted access. But school districts can set policies that regulate military recruiter access as long as it applies equally to all types of recruiters. Working with Santa Barbara Unified School District (SBUSD), a group of students, parents, veterans, and members of the Santa Barbara Friends Meeting was

able to get a policy passed in the SBUSD that limits recruiters to two visits a year and doesn't allow recruiters to collect contact information directly from students. The group I helped found, Truth in Recruitment, came out of this campaign and is continuing this effort in nearby Santa Maria.

Recruiters can be an intimidating presence on campus – for students, staff, and parents. Even though recruiters don't carry guns when in the civilian environment, they wear military uniforms and represent a violent institution. I had to give myself a push to confront a Marine recruiter who was hanging out outside the high school office with several students and staff. "What are you doing here?" I asked him. It took a lot to speak. I am generally shy of strangers and a stranger in a Marine uniform is especially intimidating. But this was one of those times when either the Spirit or my own audacity pushed me, saying, "Do what is uncomfortable, because if you just step up, you could save a life."

The actions I take aren't always preceded by deep discernment. Sometimes, I have some repair work to do after I take some action. One time, at a Santa Barbara High career day, noting that the school had a protocol that forbade recruiters from taking students' names and contact information, I approached the military recruiters' tables, told them they had broken that policy, and perhaps a bit audaciously, I ripped up their sign-up sheets. No one nominated me to follow this path, but people do gather to offer me their knowledge and support.

Some realities: The financial aid for college offered by the military is not free; it requires enlistment. Anything less than an honorable discharge means a recruit could lose all their benefits. Immigrant veterans have been deported, even after receiving honorable discharges. Suicide rates for active-duty military and veterans are higher than the death rates for troops killed in combat. Job training by the military is primarily for military jobs; most veterans have to be retrained once they enter the civilian workforce. Recruiting requires enlistees to do anything the military asks, but the contract is not reciprocal. Recruiter promises need not be fulfilled.

These kinds of details are generally unknown to most people, including Friends. I have also seen that Friends, like many others, can hold on to views about who is in the military, assuming that some young people can benefit from the guidance that the military can give them. Rather than helping eighteen-year-olds find direction in their

lives, I see military training as an unhealthy experience for fighters, their victims, and the planet.

Another commonly held belief is the idea that military discipline can be helpful for young people who have struggled in public school, had troubled home lives, or generally have trouble with authority. However, when a young person already has trouble with authority, then is living under orders 24/7, they can end up being severely disciplined or abused by their superiors and potentially receive a less-than-honorable discharge. Discharge status stays with a person throughout their life, including a requirement to list it on most job applications.

Many Friends have told me they think that a universal draft would make the U.S. Government more hesitant to start a war, because everyone would have skin in the game. In reality, draft registration and conscription are tools that strengthen the war machine. Millions have died as a result of this government-mandated access to our young people.

Recent decades of unfettered access to schools by military recruiters is a legacy we have to confront and change. Friends can oppose military recruitment by advocating for free higher education, which would remove the debt that so many accrue to pay for college. Also, funding that currently goes to the Selective Service System could be reallocated to AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, Civilian Conservation Corps, and Senior Corps to make those institutions sustainable and provide citizens with real-world job training and voluntary community-service opportunities.

My greatest hope is that youth and elders will find their voices, feel confident to express their views, question authority, speak up for their peers and their communities, and not falter in striving towards their goals. It is essential to take action in consultation and collaboration with others. This will ensure an understanding of the work that has been done before and preserve and expand the message beyond a single individual's experience. We need young leaders and experienced elders to be agents of change. Any hesitation to act should come from an informed perspective, not self-doubt. ❀

Kate Connell is a member of Santa Barbara Friends Meeting (PacYM) and outgoing director of Truth in Recruitment, www.truthinrecruitment.org. She serves on the Western Friend Board of Directors. Her passions include her adult children, Rose and Saul, her husband Fred, kittens, photography, gardening, nature conservation, and speaking truth to power through the Religious Society of Friends' process.