

Interview with Kim Stafford

Date: ca. 1998

Interviewers: Judy Ehrlich and Rick Tejada-Flores

Interview gathered as part of *The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors*. Produced by Paradigm Productions. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Paradigm Productions Collection.

Interview with Kim Stafford, conducted by Paradigm Productions ca. 1998 for *The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Paradigm Productions Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in *bold italics* was used in the final version of *The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors*.

00:00:11:00—00:01:10:00

Kim Stafford:

I'm Kim Stafford, and, born here in Oregon, grew up with the CO stories. They were family culture from the start. And my daddy used to say, when a CO comes into the room, someone from camp, it's like there's a special kind of light. He said, I don't know if others see it, but I see it. And that's how it was when the old COs would come around. There was just a different kind of, of talk—some nostalgia, but also a sense of, we are few but we are right, and, the swirl of the world around us is mysterious and cruel, and we can't change it, but we have a way of understanding it, and doing our own little part. That's what we were raised on from both my parents.

00:01:11:00—00:02:29:00

Interviewer #1:

Talk about that little part. What was it, what was it that COs represented to him—

Kim Stafford:

Well, you know, we, we grew up with stories—I think my father was taunted, as other COs were throughout the buildup to World War II and beyond, well, what would you do if, you know, and then some terrible scenario. And, the answer was, I hope not to be in that situation. And when you go to war, you enter into that situation, where you are killing for, [gestures air quotes] defense. You're protecting your buddies, and so on. And the COs' idea was, let's live in a world where we don't put ourselves in a situation where there is no alternative. You know, I've heard that from a series of our leaders—well, there is no

diplomatic alternative. And from my upbringing, I always think, of course—language, childhood, music, poetry, food, dance, education. There's so many alternatives to that terrible mutual cruelty of aggression. So that little thing is, my father would say, well, I couldn't stop the war, but I could reduce its intensity by the magnitude of one life, the life that I have a control over, my own.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Kim Stafford:

And that's a, it's a very humble but a very pure conviction. He has in a poem, never to kill and call it fate. You know, you don't get trapped in that, I had no choice. You do have a choice.

00:02:30-00:03:04:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

Well, can, when we've talked to other COs, who've, who've—

[cut]

00:03:05:00—00:04:10:00

Interviewer #2:

He said, but, but they would also frequently say that we were really naive, you know; that, that, that the world doesn't work that way; that you have to do things you don't want to do, you know? Did your father confront those issues, too?

Camera Crew Member #1:

And could you keep talking to Judy?

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, talk to Judy.

Kim Stafford:

Yes—

Interviewer #1:

[inaudible]

Kim Stafford:

—you do have to do things you don't want to do. You have to say to what I would call a skeptic, [pause] you can't control the world, but you can control yourself. And can I stop Hitler? Well, you know, a CO would say, could we take a couple hours and talk about that? And I, I think a CO might say, our country made Hitler. How has our country made Gaddafi, Khomeini, Saddam Hussein, Milošević? How have we made people—

Interviewer #3:

Really?

Kim Stafford:

—by our own arrogance as a nation?

[loud pinging noise; a woman rises and walks out in the background]

Interviewer #1:

Wait just a sec.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, let's stop.

[cut]

00:04:11:00—00:05:43:00

Kim Stafford:

Well, some people might call a pacifist naive. It's one of the defenses—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Start, start over—

Interviewer #1:

Start over.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Start again.

Kim Stafford:

OK. Some people might call a pacifist naive. I think it's, it's a defense to say, that's a lesser way; that's childish; that's optimistic. And I remember being an optimist around my father. And he would shake his head, and he'd say, oh, Kim, the bitter habit of the forlorn cause. And the, I thought he was judging my hopeful approach to things, and then I found that phrase in one of his own poems, and it goes like this at the end: [reads] "the bitter habit of the forlorn cause is my addiction; I miss it now. But face ahead and go in my own way toward my own place." [stops reading] So it's as if a pacifist says, yes, the world is a difficult place, and many things are done in a way that scars the living. But one can make a choice and lead a life that promotes, even if in what seems a futile way, a humanitarian approach. So if that's naive, let's be that way. Let's be, loving children. And the, if we have a choice, I think that's the choice I would make. I may be hammered for it, so?

00:05:44:00—00:07:16:00

Interviewer #2:

But it is a choice you made personally as a pacifist, right?

Kim Stafford:

Yes. There's a story about my father—so many emblematic stories—from his childhood, that he came home from school and, reported to his mother that there were some black children who had come to the playground and been taunted by the others. And his mother said, and what did you do, Billy, you know? Now, in such a situation, what are your choices? Turn away; fight, defend them. He said, I stood by them. You know, so to find an action that is not passive. Pacifism, pacifism doesn't mean passive. It means not shutting off the connective impulse between people. It's very active. It means not doing what a, I think of a soldier as someone who has pacified, has destroyed, has subdued the human affection by which we live. And the pacifist is someone who lives by that—

Interviewer #1:

Mm.

Kim Stafford:

—and will see someone who can be construed as an enemy and think, as my father would say, I'm gonna try to find if this person could be my friend. Say, what, this person, your

friend? This person is trying to make your life miserable and disagree with you. Well, but something's making him do that. I'm gonna find if there's a way to be friends. Is that naive? Good.

00:07:17:00—00:08:05:00

Interviewer #3:

[laughs]

Interviewer #1:

I liked the way you said that. In “Down In The Heart,” the thing about, and who would later be our friend.

Kim Stafford:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, that—

Kim Stafford:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

—I think you, you mentioned that in the—

Kim Stafford:

Yeah, where, in camp one time, you know, a, one of the supervisors said, if I had my way with the COs, I'd line them all up and [imitates machine-gun noise], you know, made the sound of the machine-gun. And, my father, in reporting this, said, yes, there was a man, who later became our friend, who began with this attitude. Well, that sense of, Baghdad, you are my friend, I want to visit you. Children of Iraq, I want to know you. You know, that, Saddam Hussein, your family, tell me about your family. You know, there, there is something here. I don't think that's naive, I think that's courageous.

00:08:05:00—00:09:43:00

Interviewer #1:

Talk a little bit more about courageousness, and, and being a conscientious objector.

Kim Stafford:

Well, my father, there's a story that the day before he left for CO camp, not knowing what would happen out there, where he was, he could be a target for people's hatred. You know, you are a slacker, you have turned your back on your country, my, the men in my family are fighting, you're making it hard for them. And, in fact, he, he came close to being hung in Arkansas. This was a, a, a real danger. And the day before he left, a friend asked him, are you afraid? And he said, I have an imagination. Well, to go forth into that world as a marked person, a vulnerable minority, and yet to know you had to do that, I think that's very courageous. I think my father would say, he would have pity for—and maybe this is an overstatement, but—pity for someone who is coerced into the military, shepherded, pushed, and doesn't know there are alternatives; who has to subdue those human impulses and go forth and kill. Now, you could say, well, we're stopping Hitler. I mean, there were, there are all kinds of ideas. But, my father would say, well, it's complicated, let's talk. And that would be the beginning of a long exploration.

00:09:43:00-00:12:09:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm. Could you tell that story about almost being hung in Alabama?

Kim Stafford:

Well, in, in one of the camps, the COs, they were in a little town in Arkansas, and they went into town on the weekend. It was their time off, and one of the fellows was, sketching, he had his easel, and another one was writing a poem. And my father was reading Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and so they were lounging in the middle of this little town. And, as people do on a Sunday, folks gathered around, and, you know, looked over the shoulder of the artist, and sort of inquiring, you know, you're from the camp, and so on. And suddenly someone grabbed this drawing and said, what's that? And the CO said, why, sir, that's my art. This isn't art, this is a map, you're gonna show where those troop trains are coming through, and—you know, it was sort of an abstract piece. And then the, another person grabbed the poem, said, what's this? Well, that's a poem I'm writing. This isn't a poem, it doesn't rhyme. And at this point, someone said, get a rope. Those are magic words, you know. This has turned into the mob. And then they turn to my father, what are you doing? Well, I'm reading Whitman. And as my father said, a hothead in the mob grabbed the book out of his hand and announced to the crowd, I'll show you what poetry sounds like, and began declaiming Whitman. And, course, after four or five lines trailed off, because it didn't rhyme. It didn't support this case that we can mob these men, because they are writing poetry that doesn't sound like poetry, and the—see, my father, I think, would say—well, I should finish the story. Some saint in the crowd said, call the sheriff! Then the COs are thinking, yeah, call the sheriff. So the sheriff came blustering in, and, I'll take care of this, slackers, I'll get them out of here, and got them in the car, and said, oh boy, I'm gonna take you boys to, back to camp, you know, you probably shouldn't come into town.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Kim Stafford:

But I think my father would say, what a hard thing for those people to be that afraid, to be willing to kill because they were afraid. Let's not live that way.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Kim Stafford:

So, you know, the courage to go your own way to your own place, and do things by your own code. It was a lonely thing.

00:12:10:00—00:12:50:00

Interviewer #1:

Just one other, the end to that story, in the book, when the, he goes back—

Kim Stafford:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—and the preacher makes that comment.

Kim Stafford:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

I thought that was really important.

Kim Stafford:

Yeah. In that little camp—

Interviewer #1:

Hmm.

Kim Stafford:

—after the mob, they got back to camp, and the preacher gathered everyone together and they told their account of the lynch mob. And the preacher who was there said, now, don't forget, your country is spending millions of dollars convincing people that the world is this way, and that, you are a danger to them. You can't expect to change their minds in a short conversation. That's what we're up against, let's be careful.

00:12:51:00—00:14:28:00

Interviewer #1:

You're bringing up a good point about changing minds. I mean, was, did, did the COs ever think they were going to change anyone's minds, or did they care if they did or not, or, you know, how did each of them—there's this whole feeling, each person comes to this very individually, and is there any evangelistic quality at all to the, to the—

Kim Stafford:

I think—

Interviewer #1:

—that situation?

—one of the, one of the puzzles for the COs was, they couldn't stop the war. I mean, that's one thing a soldier could think, I'm part of a big movement, we have huge resources, we're organized, we're up against a tough customer, Hitler, but we're gonna go stop him. The COs, it was a bigger task than Hitler. It was the whole world. It was their own countrymen, and their own relatives. My father's brother, a bomber pilot, you know. So they were very isolated, and I think they felt, all you can do is turn in the right direction and see how far you get. It wasn't the kind of work that had a known outcome. My father, all through life, he, he felt, in a way the war had gone on and on. In the sixties, when anti-war groups used militant methods, aggressive strategies, shouting, my father didn't feel of a piece with that approach. That, what a strange thing to be a pacifist in the sixties and feel alone from the peace movement because it was militaristic. Very strange.

00:14:28:00—00:16:39:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. So it's a different—talk a little about poetry and how it fits into pacifism and how your father's poetry speaks for this...



Kim Stafford:

My father, my father wrote sixty books of poetry, and he wrote every morning. It's a habit that, I think, was really solidified in camp. In the CO camp, here were these intellectual, some religious, spiritual people—seekers, he would say. And they all decided to get up early. And so they got up, four in the morning, and they would have their classes, and their, they had their library. And my father just kept doing that the rest of his life. He'd get up at four or sometimes three in the morning to write, and he had that cell of freedom every day. And I think, his pacifism made his poetry turn a receptive ear to, nature, to other cultures, to children. He was a peacemaker in so many directions, and his poetry was a listening to all kinds of mysteries, of—I, I thought, after he died, of a, a phrase he never said, but I think it speaks for his approach as a writer and a teacher that would come out of the, draft, CO form, where you say, I will not engage in war in any form. And I think in his life and his poetry and his teaching, it would go something like this: I will not engage in war, in any form, upon my students, or upon those around me culturally, in a way that does not match my own experience as a writer, which is to be a receiver, a listener, one who honors connections. So that pacifism, I think—his art was filled with it. Being a listener.

00:16:40:00—00:17:11:00

Interviewer #1:

Connect that, being a listener, is that part of pacifism, being a listener?

Kim Stafford:

I think a, a pacifist is to be an activist on all sorts of wavelengths that may not be honored by others. You read the newspaper, yes, you listen to the radio. You will be aware of the propaganda coming at you, but you also, be—

[something slides loudly]

Camera Crew Member #1:

No.

Kim Stafford:

We may have to do that again.

Interviewer #1:

Yes, [laughs], it's like it's—

[cut]

00:17:11:00—00:17:34:00

Interviewer #2:

—because I do, there's, there's a streak in pacifists of, of really going their own way—

Kim Stafford:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

—whatever the price, and, you know—

Kim Stafford:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm. And in poetry too, yeah.

Interviewer #2:

And, and it's, what's nice about your father is he does that in terms of his art and his—

Kim Stafford:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

—politics.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm. It all—

Interviewer #2:

Though I don't know if he would even define it as politics. It's more like his values, right?

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Kim Stafford:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

Are you on?

Camera Crew Member #1:

I'm rolling.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, go ahead. Talk to Judy—

00:17:34:00—00:19:31:00

Kim Stafford:

OK.

Interviewer #2:

—about that.

Interviewer #1:

But you know what, can you—

Kim Stafford:

Listening.

Interviewer #2:

Oh, excuse me.

Interviewer #1:

—remember what you were in the middle of before?

Kim Stafford:

Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer #2:

[inaudible]

Interviewer #1:

OK. If you could do that again. It was really nice.

Kim Stafford:

I think, a, a pacifist, as I learned what that means from my father's, life example, is to be someone, receiving on so many levels from people around you: from nature, from memory, from your own heart and spirit; that any incident that comes up, there isn't a simple answer, and yet you must act. He says in a poem, called, "Tuned In Late One Night," [reads]: "Now I am fading, with this ambition, to read with my brights full on, to write on the clear glass typewriter, to listen with sympathy, to speak like a child." [finishes reading] So that the most sophisticated thing one might do would be to speak like a child, directly, without feigning anything, without calculating the effects of what you say, but to say, this is how it is for me. Well, to me, that's an act of listening to the self. And to me, this is at the core of what America should be. My father used to say, you can legislate freedom of speech, but you have to learn freedom in speech. You have to learn how to be actively free. It cannot be conferred upon you. So again, the pacifist is the activist, is one acting on this principle of—well, as my father in another poem, [recites] "how to explain to the dean, right has a long and intricate name. And the saying of it is a lonely thing." [ends recitation] You're in this place, you can't change the world. Say your piece.

00:19:32:00-00:19:56:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm. And say it—

[someone coughs]

Interviewer #1:

—and I think what Rick was trying to—

[someone coughs again]

Interviewer #1:

—say it, even though say it alone. Say it, even though—

Kim Stafford:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—no one's in—

Kim Stafford:

Uh-huh.

Interviewer #1:

—step behind you, that—

Kim Stafford:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—you're out there—

Kim Stafford:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—all on your own.

Kim Stafford:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

But, I mean, the courage to do that, if you could talk a little more about—

Kim Stafford:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—how the COs—

Interviewer #3:

We got a problem.

Camera Crew Member #1:

On the left.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Are you getting it on your meter?

Interviewer #1:

Sorry.

Kim Stafford:

[laughs]

[production discussion]

Interviewer #2:

[inaudible] with the headphones off.

Kim Stafford:

Daddy would love this.

Interviewer #1:

I'm just going to jump out the minute [laughs].

00:19:57:00-

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, let's, let's talk about living on the fringes of society.

Interviewer #1:

[laughs]

Kim Stafford:

Yeah, OK, sure. Yeah. My father identified with, Native Americans, with people who had been marginalized by the truth of their existence, I think, in all sorts of ways. He was always so alert to the student in class who was maybe at the back, not the forthright, smart, articulate one in the front. That's fine, but that one—he has a poem called “Gesture Toward an Unfound Renaissance,” you know, the girl who didn't understand where the lessons led, she has his allegiance. And I think that that feeling of harmony with someone who is not heard by the world, but is on to the truth. The truth of one's own experience, that had his allegiance. He has another poem that says—it's about dandelions on the church lawn, you know, and the little seeds go floating off, and, the poem ends by saying [recites]: “God is not big; He is right.” [end recitation] And that distinction of, well, will our cause win? We don't know. Are other people with us? We care, but we can't control whether they are. We hope they are, but we can't make them. Are we gonna keep doing what we believe is right? Yes. Well, that often puts you in a very isolated place. No one is nodding. People are looking at you skeptically and you have to say, let me listen to you and you listen to me, let's see what we can learn. It's a lonely place. And I think one of the funny things about my dad, he, he taught at a college, and yet he wasn't one of the academic poets. In fact, someone told me, you now, your dad was kind of a peacemaker between the academic poets and the free verse people. So, oh, he was a peacemaker? You know—

Interviewer #1:

Mm.

Kim Stafford:

—this habit, is that the bitter habit of the forlorn cause, again? Probably, but it's worth a try.

00:22:09:00—00:22:54:00

Interviewer #1:

You brought up, it's something you, you said just, just jogged, I was, something I was reading today in the, in “Down in the Heart” [sic] about the idea that people, [pause] oh gosh, I just lost it. I'm sorry.

Kim Stafford:

[to Interviewer #1] While you're searching, [to Interviewer #2] Rick, did I—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, while I'm searching—

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, that was definitely—

Kim Stafford:

—did I—

Interviewer #1:

—I want to get back to the other thing.

Interviewer #2:

How, how much do we have on this tape?

Interviewer #1:

Oh... what were you just—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Six minutes.

Interviewer #1:

—saying?

Camera Crew Member #3:

Three-twenty.

Interviewer #1:

Oh, it's really late.

Kim Stafford:

I was saying, God is not big, but He is right, the dandelions, the—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, the whole thing about... oh! That people have the choice, could go and do something good. It wasn't something your father says—



Kim Stafford:

Ah...

Interviewer #1:

—it's something George says, I think—

Kim Stafford:

OK.

[someone walks by in the background coughing]

Interviewer #1:

—in the book. You know, they could turn around tomorrow and all—

Kim Stafford:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

—commit their lives to something good—

Kim Stafford:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

—but they won't do that again until it's another war, until they have to fight again—

Kim Stafford:

Ah...

Interviewer #1:

Do you know what I'm talking—

Kim Stafford:

Yeah—

Interviewer #1:

—about?

Kim Stafford:

—yeah, yeah, I remember that passage.

Interviewer #1:

And it was sort of, that—

[cut]

00:22:55:00—00:23:47:00

Interviewer #1:

—violence, and...

Camera Crew Member #1:

Go ahead.

Interviewer #1:

I don't know, I just—

Kim Stafford:

Yeah, I guess, I feel one of the mysteries is, a war joins people. It's an irony. How does this country come together? Against an aggressor. And to, it's tough to think, what is that strong, what could be that big? We keep searching. Family, childhood, education, you know, what is a cause that big? Well, I think, my father, you know, the COs called themselves, the quiet of the land, and, the quiet of the land has to have a voice that can be heard. How to do that without overwhelming, arguing, trying to un-convince people of their beliefs, but let the, the, the pool of their conscience rise up, maybe, and make a change.

00:23:47:00—00:25:17:00

Interviewer #1:

You bring up something important, though. How come fifty years later, we hadn't, I mean, you knew about CPS camp, 'cause your father was in it. I was in CCCO and didn't even know about it.

Kim Stafford:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

How has this been lost? How come we don't know about this, that, what happened in World War II? Why do you think it's been such an untold story?

Kim Stafford:

It was traumatic. I think many Japanese-Americans weren't told by their parents about the internment camps. I think the children of many soldiers were not told in full what war was. It was another place, you know, you had to be there to understand. I, I think my father, he, he wouldn't bring up CPS camp gratuitously, and people didn't often ask him. So it lived as a, a nurturing secret for him and his friends. It's, it's odd, I guess you could call it a footnote to history, and yet it seems central to me, in the way it, as a thread—12,000 men. That thread, that narrow, that few carried a, a huge culture of pacifism from the Twenties and Thirties through to, flower again in the Sixties, in its, in a, in a different form, in its own way. How could that thread be so small, and so influential, and so unknown at the same time? It's very strange.

00:25:18:00—00:25:41:00

Interviewer #2:

Well, isn't part of it due to the, the basic revisionist nature of history, and historians, and when you, when you, when you look at history, you're pretty selective, and, and if you win the war, that's one history, and if you lose the war, that's another history.

Kim Stafford:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

So it has to do with who tells the stories, doesn't it?

Kim Stafford:

Yeah. Well, there was no victory for the COs. There was no parade.

00:25:42:00—00:27:02:00

Interviewer #2:

Do you know how your father felt when the war was over? Maybe that's a question—

Kim Stafford:

He tells about, the war's over, we bombed Japan, it's over, victory! Celebrate! And how the COs looked at each other in puzzlement and pain. How can we celebrate? The work has just begun. We've found new ways to be cruel to each other—

Interviewer #2:

Tell that story once more time, but—

Kim Stafford:

OK.

Interviewer #2:

—this time, say your father's name, OK?

Kim Stafford:

OK.

Interviewer #2:

I want his name.

Kim Stafford:

Yeah. Well, William Stafford, my dad, and the other COs, at the end of the war, when— we've dropped the bomb, we've killed all those Japanese, the war's over, victory, celebrate, you know; horns blaring, people kissing each other, shouting. My father and the other COs were puzzled and, I, I, think, a little paralyzed by this, that now the real work has begun. We have found new, more efficient ways to kill each other, at a greater distance, and, *what will be victory for a CO? I think the, the only sure victory is to be true to your beliefs, and your witness. But you're going to be alone, almost always.*

00:27:03:00—00:28:33:00

Interviewer #2:

And—

Interviewer #1:

Hmm.

Interviewer #2:

—and that, that sort of reminds me of, of the title of, of this collection, *The Darkness*—

Kim Stafford:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

—*Around Us is Deep*. That sort of reflects this isolation, doesn't it?

Kim Stafford:

Yeah. Darkness is a word that comes up in my father's writing often. His National Book Award was for the book, *Traveling Through the Dark*, which was about a drive through the night, and trenchant things that happen there, but, but it speaks for a larger feeling, I think, of through the darkness. Another poem ends, "the darkness around us is deep." Now who is this, us? I think it's people who want to understand a better way of being than our government can invent, or propaganda on either side. It's a thing that we have to invent right out of our lives, out of our families, out of childhood, and parenting, and teaching, and cooking and dancing together; all those sweet, peacemaking ways that are seen as smaller than reality, the news. So, the darkness, you're alone. You know, my father has in that poem, "Traveling Through the Dark," the line, "I thought hard for us all." What a lonely way to go—"I thought hard for us all." That's a tough way to live.

00:28:33:00-00:28:44:00

[Kim Stafford turns around to look at something behind him]

Interviewer #1:

[whispered] Do we...

Interviewer #2:

It, it seems to imply a sense of responsibility, too, doesn't it?

[Kim Stafford turns back to the interviewers in surprise at what he saw]

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry, if you could—

Kim Stafford:

Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer #1:

Just, I'm, it's [laughs]...

[laughter]

Interviewer #1:

This is great, though.

Kim Stafford:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

No, I—

[cut]

[end of tape]

00:28:45:00—00:29:38:00

Kim Stafford:

—yeah.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Interviewer #2:

OK, go ahead.

Interviewer #1:

Go ahead. So...

Kim Stafford:

OK, well, the, to be with a big truth about the world—we're here together. Mutual dependence is reality. There are no enemies, there are only hurt people.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Kim Stafford:

Afraid people. And what do you do? Well, if you're a writer, you put forth the little pure voice that you know. And I want to read a poem, early one of my father's, called, "At the Bomb Testing Site" [reads]: "At noon in the desert a panting lizard waited for history"—

[distant sound of a plane]

Kim Stafford:

—"its elbows tense, watching the curve"—

Interviewer #2:

Stop.

Kim Stafford:

Yeah, the plane. [laughs]

Interviewer #1:

It was all—

Kim Stafford:

It's perfect.

Interviewer #1:

It's kinda—

[cut]

00:29:38:00—00:31:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

And...

Interviewer #1:

We like to control.

Kim Stafford:

Yeah, yeah.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Go ahead.

Kim Stafford:

Yeah. OK, so here's this big cruel world, with all kinds of forces you can't control. The thing you can control is your own voice, your own act of witness. And my father wrote many poems that would speak out of that small, exact place, and an early one was called, "At The Bomb Testing Site" [reads]: "At noon in the desert a panting lizard waited for history, its elbows tense, watching the curve of a particular road as if something might happen. It was looking at something farther off than people could see, an important scene acted in stone for little selves at the flute end of consequence. There was just a continent without much on it under a sky that never cared less. Ready for a change, the elbows waited. The hands gripped hard on the desert." [finishes reading] And so my father's, he's not the pilot; he's not the general; he's not the legislator. He is the little self, the lizard, the parent, the pacifist; the one who is watching these things in history about to happen. And what can he do? He can be utterly alert, and he can tell how it is. That's not much; that's everything.

00:31:13:00—00:32:22:00

Interviewer #1:

Talk a little more about poetry and pacifism.

Kim Stafford:

Well... poetry and pacifism...I, I think—one thing my father said, you know, he was a teacher. William Stafford, the great poetry teacher. And yet his ways were very mysterious to his students often, because he wouldn't tell them how to write. He wouldn't tell them what he liked in what they wrote. He wouldn't tell them what was good. He wouldn't tell them what was successful. He would tell them, I want to hear that poem again. You know, he would turn them into the witness. And he said about his own practice, I don't want to write good poems, I want to write inevitable poems; the poems that, given who I am, they are what I must write. So the poem is that thing that comes forth from who you are, and if each person can put that forth, we'll relish what we find together. There's no judgment in it, there's only



honesty.

00:32:23:00—00:32:51:00

Interviewer #1:

What was the truth of the CO experience that, for him, as the, what, is there a poem, you think, that most speaks the, to that World War II experience? To the...

Kim Stafford:

Well, I have this one, “Objector.”

Interviewer #1:

Oh, the one about, you have to read the one about the—

Interviewer #2:

Well, I'd like, I'd like, “In Camp”—

Interviewer #1:

Oh, what if, “We Were in Camp”—

Interviewer #2:

—certainly.

Interviewer #1:

—yeah, “We Were In Camp,” with—

Interviewer #2:

That one—

Kim Stafford:

Oh, yeah, OK.

Interviewer #1:

—playing the accordion, and—was it the accordion?

Interviewer #3:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

Accordion, yeah.

Interviewer #3:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

I was thinking harmonica, no, I'm...

Kim Stafford:

[paging through book] I'll have to find it here, unless you have it, right—

Interviewer #2:

I've got it.

Interviewer #1:

Just a minute, George Houser—

[cut]

00:32:52:00-00:34:34:00

Interviewer #2:

Go ahead.

Camera Crew Member #1:

So what are we gonna do about the book and reading?

Interviewer #2:

That's OK.

Interviewer #1:

It's OK.

Interviewer #2:

He's just gonna read it.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Kim Stafford:

I look back as a son of a CO and try to imagine, what was it like? Those pictures of daddy in the baggy pants with the holes at the knees from working so hard, and, you know, those old books in the library that have rubber-stamped in the back, Belden CPS, you know, where everyone pooled their books to make a library. The old ax-handle painted red. You know, those old tokens, but, my father left word in the form of these poems. Here's one called, "In Camp" [reads]: "That winter of the war every day sprang outwards. I was a prisoner. Someone brought me gifts. That year now is far. Birds can't fly the miles to find a forgotten cause. No task I do today has justice at the end. All I know is my degree of leaning in this wind where, once the mind springs free, every cause has reason, but reason has no law. In camps like that, if I should go again, I'd still study the Gospel and play the accordion." [finishes reading]

Interviewer #1:

The cause, you, you said, you know, something you talked—

[cut]

00:34:35:00-00:34:38:00

[production discussion]

Kim Stafford:

Well, how are we doing? Are we getting—

Interviewer #1:

It's up to you. We're, we're, we have nowhere to go.

Kim Stafford:

No, I, I don't mean time-wise.

Interviewer #1:

Oh.

Kim Stafford:

But just, are we on the, are we getting onto the—

Interviewer #1:

I think we're doing great. I think you're—

Kim Stafford:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

—fabulous.

Kim Stafford:

I'm gonna—

[cut]

00:34:49:00-00:35:10:00

Interviewer #3:

—look what God and we hath wrought.

Kim Stafford:

[laughs]

Interviewer #2:

Spoken like a proud parent.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, I love it, yeah.

Kim Stafford:

Well, how about if I read three more poems—

Interviewer #2:

Yeah—

Kim Stafford:

—here?

Interviewer #2:

—read, read your poems, and then we'll let you go.

Interviewer #1:

[overlapping with Interviewer #2] Yes, that'd be great. OK, good, good.

Interviewer #1:

Did you come in on—

Interviewer #2:

Try one of these in extreme closeup, please, thank you. Just for the fun of it.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. I see you.

Kim Stafford:

Are we going here?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, oh, oh...

00:35:11:00—00:36:15:00

Kim Stafford:

Well, my father's outlook on the world began in World War I. He was born in 1914. And so,

as a child he would watch these parades, this patriotism. And reaching way back from late in his life, he wrote this poem called, "Learning." [reads] "A piccolo played, then a drum. Feet began to come—a part of the music. Here came a horse, clippety clop, away. My mother said, 'Don't run—the army is after someone other than us. If you stay, you will learn our enemy.' Then he came, the speaker. He stood in the square. He told us who to hate. I watched my mother's face, its quiet. 'That's him, she said.'" [stops reading] So who's our enemy? The one who tells who to hate, because that's not right.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

00:36:16:00-00:37:46:00

Kim Stafford:

Later, after many wars my father experienced, he wrote a, one harking back, he wrote a poem harking back to World War II called, "Explaining The Big One." And those of you who know that war will recognize Ike, and, Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin, Hitler—they're all in here, in this movie of a poem. "Explaining The Big One" [reads]: "Remember that leader with the funny mustache?—liked flags and marching?—gave loyalty a bad name. Didn't drink, they say, but liked music, and was jolly, sometimes. And then the one with the big mustache and the wrinkled uniform, always jovial for the camera but eliminated malcontents by the millions. He was our friend, I think. Women? Oh yes, women. They danced and sang for the soldiers or volunteered their help. We loved them, except for Tokyo Rose—didn't we kill her afterward? Our own leaders?—the jaunty cigarette-holder, the one with the cigar....Remember the pearl-handled revolvers? And Ike, who liked golf? It was us against the bad guys then. You should have been there." [stops reading] Well, maybe that's the CO elder telling about the old days. Can I read one more?

Interviewer #1:

Yes, please.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

00:37:47:00-00:39:05:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Is that the—

Interviewer #2:

Yes.

Kim Stafford:

I think this, I think this poem might speak for his, trying to keep his own code alive in a world that doesn't understand. "Objector" [reads]: "In line at lunch I cross my fork and spoon to ward off complicity—the ordered life our leaders have offered us. Thin as a knife, our chance to live depends on such a sign, while others talk and The Pentagon from the moon is bouncing exact commands: 'Forget your faith; be ready for whatever it takes to win: we face annihilation unless all citizens get in line.' I bow and cross my fork and spoon: somewhere other citizens more fearfully bow in a place terrorized by their kind of oppressive state. Our signs both mean, 'You hostages over there will never be slaughtered by my act.' Our vows cross, never to kill and call it fate." [stops reading]

00:39:06:00—

Interviewer #1:

Hmm. What did you learn from your father's conscientious objection?

Interviewer #2:

Well, and especially—that's a good question, but put it in the context of being, coming of age in, in the Sixties, and confronting another war and another set of values—

Camera Crew Member #1:

—[whispered] the tape, its making that—

Interviewer #2:

—and yet having this experience of your father's to draw on? What did, what did that mean for you?

Kim Stafford:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

Is that the same question as yours?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, sort of. Do...

Kim Stafford:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

I want to get to Vietnam.

Kim Stafford:

I think daddy taught us, not with his words, but with his life, what he called, millions of intricate moves. [pause] You probably won't win. People probably won't understand. Terrible things will happen. Your children will be hurt. But all of that doesn't make any difference about the purity of what you say [crying], and what you witness for.

Interviewer #1:

Hmm.

Kim Stafford:

[wipes tear from his eye] And I have to go. [laughs]

Interviewer #2:

That was good.

Interviewer #1:

I know. Thank you so much.

[cut]

[end interview]

00:40:36:00