

Peace activist 'Miss Cathy' released from jail

By LARRY MITCHELL - Staff Writer

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A smiling Cathy Webster returned home to Chico Friday after spending 60 days in jail in Sacramento for trespassing on an Army base.

"It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be," she said in an interview Friday afternoon.

Last year, Webster, who is a grandmother herself, organized what she called 1,000 Grandmothers, a contingent of grannies who joined in the annual protest of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation at Fort Benning in Georgia.

Thousands of people participated in the November protest. Webster was one of 16 who chose to walk onto the base and get arrested to demonstrate their opposition to the institute, which trains soldiers from nations in Latin America.

Webster, who is active in the local peace movement, said she was apprehensive on learning she'd do her 60 days in a Sacramento County Jail. However, she was sent to a branch jail, not the main jail downtown, and conditions weren't too bad, she said.

In fact, when she arrived, two months ago, the inmates had just been watching her being interviewed on television. They cheered and applauded when she walked into the jail.

She stayed in a dorm with space for 66 women. The other prisoners were younger, most in their 20s. They were there for such offenses as prostitution and selling or using drugs.

Although many of the other prisoners were surprised that she'd essentially volunteered to go to jail, they seemed to admire her and respected her cause, she said. "Everybody called me 'Miss Cathy.'"

In jail, the food was bad, it was noisy and frustrating, but she wasn't abused, Webster said. "I'm glad I did it."

The institute, formerly known as the School of the Americas, has been the target of lots of criticism. Opponents say its graduates serve in militaries that fight their own people in order to keep corrupt governments in power. Some graduates have committed crimes, such as rape and murder of ordinary people, union organizers and members of the clergy, critics of the school say.

On arriving in Chico Friday, Webster went directly to the office of Rep. Wally Herger, R-Chico. She was met there by about 20 supporters.

Webster had hoped to meet with Herger and urge him to vote for House Resolution 1707, which would cut off funding for the school. But the congressman was back in Washington.

So Webster spoke with Carol Barsotti, one of Herger's field representatives, and gave her a pair of pink-and-blue knitted baby booties she'd hoped to give the congressman.

The group 1,000 Grandmothers has been knitting booties and presenting them to members of Congress whom they ask to vote to close the institute. The booties symbolize the need to create a peaceful world for the next generation, Webster said.

Hendrik Voss, a spokesman for School of the Americas Watch, an organization that works against the institute, said it's unclear exactly when HR1707 will be voted on.

Last time there was a vote, it fell 15 votes short of passing. He said its chances of passing seem better this year.

Voss said he's encouraged that some Latin American countries have stopped sending military personnel to the institute for training. Costa Rica announced this week it would no longer participate in the institute's training, he said. Venezuela, Argentina and Uruguay made that decision earlier.

At any given time, about 800 soldiers and police from 17 countries in Central America and South America are being trained at the school, he said.

Staff writer Larry Mitchell can be reached at 896-7759 or lmitchell@chicoer.com.