My life was changed by members of the Merton Center before I even met them. In 1980, living in New Castle, I would spread the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette out on my kitchen table every morning to read about Molly Rush and the other seven Plowshares, as they called themselves. They were protesting nuclear weapons. Astounded by their courage, I thought, "If they can do that, surely I can do something, too."

I wrote to one of the Plowshares imprisoned in Pittsburgh. His replies were so impassioned that I put the letters in the middle of the dining room table and would walk a big circle around them, trying to decide whether to address or avoid dealing with the issues he raised.

Finally, I met Molly Rush. She was like many of us: a mother, a wife, a neighbor who was concerned — not hysterical. She was worried about an

arms race out of control. I left a successful travel agency and came to Pittsburgh to work at The Thomas Merton Center for a year — a wise move for me. I met an astonishing group of people.

Today, Molly Rush is an organizer at the Merton Center, a locus for peace and justice activities in Pittsburgh. Rush keeps a quote above her desk from anthropologist Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world: indeed it’s the only thing that ever has!” It succinctly describes many of the people working at the Merton Center — their actions rarely make headlines, but their impact is felt far beyond the center’s walls. Perhaps more importantly, members speak enthusiastically of the changes in their own lives that came about through experiences there.

“The story is largely invisible,” says Rush, “but our influence has been throughout the community. We allow groups to form and they spin off on their own. In the beginning there were few groups operating out of the center. Today there is a multiplicity of them.”

The center focuses on topics as diverse as Central America, nuclear weapons, labor issues, hunger, racism, and economics. Paid membership holds around 700, but its monthly newspaper, The New People, reaches thousands. Headquarters is a storefront in the Garfield section of Pittsburgh.

Merton — a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky in the mid-20th century — would blush at his fame. He was a prophet whose writings foreshadowed many concerns and problems of living the spiritual life today. Merton was exploring the common ground between Catholicism and Buddhism when he died accidentally in 1968.

At that time, Pittsburghers like Rush were protesting against Vietnam through an organization called CEASE, the Committee to End Asian Slaughter and Exploitation. Fellow protester Larry

Mabel Karsch at the 1997 KKK rally in downtown Pittsburgh.
Kessler proposed that global action must have a local component. Merton Center supporter Suzanne Polen recalls, “I had been reading Merton since 1955. When Larry Kessler said there should be a peace center here and that we should name it after Merton, I lit up like a light bulb.”

The center found early support among the Catholic community. Three women from religious orders staffed the center along with Rush: Betty Sundry, a Sister of Divine Providence, Stella Smetanka, a member of the Sisters of Mercy, now on the staff of the University of Pittsburgh Law School, and Janet Brink, who was a sister of the Benedictine Order at the time. Operating expenses and a small stipend for the staff came from groups such as the Post Vatican II, Pittsburgh Conference of Laity, the Catholic Interracial Council, and the Association of Pittsburgh Priests. Father Jack O’Malley, a priest in the Pittsburgh Diocese, persuaded 30 priests from that group to pledge $10 a month.

Rush explains, “When we opened our doors, we were an ecumenical center, with strong Catholic underpinnings striving for inclusivity.” The religious community has remained integral to the center, in an alliance with people from other churches or from no church at all.

The Merton Center became a refuge for people who felt their own churches were dragging their feet on social issues. “We had to prod the church along,” Father O’Malley remembers. “Dr. King was challenging us on the national level. You never asked anyone about their faith, but you looked around and saw people so proud to stand up because they were finally acting on their faith.”

Rush’s own story illustrates how commitment to a belief can alter lives and events. A wife and mother of six children, she first became involved in civil rights issues through her parish. Within a few years, her belief that the arms race was immoral led her to enter a General Electric facility at King of Prussia, Pa., with seven others including the Berrigan brothers, Phil and Dan. The group hammered on the nose cones of nuclear missiles manufactured at the site.

Rush saw herself as bearing witness to her religious beliefs, beating the swords into plowshares, as the prophet Amos had foretold: “I did the action to show others that ordinary people can have an impact.” But her actions created quite a stir within her family and in the community.
All eight of the activists spent time in jail, presenting their own eloquent defense, while Ramsey Clark, former attorney general, stayed close by. The story is told in Liane Norman's book, *Hammer of Justice*, but the final resolution came after the book went to press. In 1991, 11 years after the trial, all eight Plowshare members were sent back for re-sentencing and given "time served" by a different judge.

Rush could only tell people beforehand that she was going to do something "very important," and when the center's board gathered afterward, there was no question that it would support her. Father O'Malley spoke for the Merton Center board: "Molly is us, she came from us."

Looking back, O'Malley says, "Molly was always out front, and it took the rest of them some time to catch up. These activities call for real heroes. I thought if they could do that, then surely I could stand up in the pulpit and speak about these issues." O'Malley is particularly proud of a grape boycott in the early 1970s to protest low wages: "The Merton Center was a base for financial support and provided the picket lines.... Al and Elena Rojas, grape pickers, came to live with us, educate us and worship with us in the '70s. We went to different grocery stores and the produce yards at the Strip for vigils at 5:00 a.m. ... They won the hearts and minds of people, and stayed with us for years."

**Angele Ellis** was a Pittsburger living in Philadelphia at the time of the Plowshares' action at the GE plant. "I felt the impact of the Plowshares, but my reaction was negative. I thought it was an idea whose time had come and gone with the sixties." But her husband, Mark Murphy, had grown up in King of Prussia, and the action had a tremendous impact on him: "For Mark, it was a kind of breaking open the secrecy."

The issue remained alive for them when they returned to Pittsburgh in 1983. They saw the film, *In the King of Prussia*, a recreation of the trial where the defendants played themselves and Martin Sheen played the judge. Ellis recalls:

"I was blown away by the film. I understood why Molly and the others had done what they did and why it was important that they do it. Mark and I attended a class Molly and Liane Norman were teaching on nonviolence, another eye-opener. I started seeing the world differently. A quote by Shirley Hazard, from *The Transit of Venus*, explains it well: 'That's the thing that you don't..."
expect; that a state of mind can overtake you like an event.’ I think that’s what happened to me. I became exposed to ways of thinking that hit like a thunderbolt. It changed my ability to act, and my necessity of acting.”

Within a year, Ellis left her career as a business and technical writer to work full time in the local peace and justice campaign. “I was especially involved in the River City Nonviolence Resistance Campaign which meant two leafletings a week, a weekly meeting, and civil disobedience. The campaign aimed to raise the conscience of those who worked at Westinghouse and Rockwell, developing parts for nuclear weapons. Members did lunchtime lobbying, passing out literature at the corporate offices every week.”

Ellis also worked with the Pittsburgh Peace Institute for 10 years, organizing classes on topics such as racism and sexism for children and adults. She participated in civil disobedience seven times: “It’s terrifying, but it is freeing…. There are people in the movement who gave a great deal of support without doing civil disobedience. I don’t want to privilege civil disobedience as the only way.”

More recently she co-authored a book with Marilyn Llewellyn, C.S.I. (and Professor of Education at Carlow College), Dealing with Differences, Taking Action on Class, Race, Gender and Disability. The book is a diversity workbook aimed at both teachers and high school students.

Angele Ellis’ husband, Mark Murphy, left the large law firm in 1987 in which he was an associate. Since then, he has practiced public interest law as a lawyer with the Disabilities Law Project, a non-profit that advocates for the rights of persons with disabilities.

Father Don Fisher had a habit of taking long walks along Braddock Avenue in East Hills to prepare the sermons for his congregation at Our Lady of the Most Blessed Sacrament. As he did that one day after Rush’s action in King of Prussia, he felt that he was being called to participate in civil disobedience. “Not everyone feels they need to do it, but I did.” Fisher remembers that he was frightened before the first time, at the White House. “But after that, civil disobedience freed me to think about doing it again, and to think of the reasons we would be doing it.”

Fisher took part in civil disobedience several times in Pittsburgh:

“I remember a rally in Trinity Episcopal Church. There was a ‘die-in’ during the liturgy, to bring to mind the horrors of nuclear war. People were falling all over the aisles, writhing in pain, and yelling for their children. The church was packed. It was powerful and it made me cry. It touched me so much, that when I had the opportunity to be part of a ‘die-in’ to mark the 40th anniversary of Hiroshima, in August of 1985, at Rockwell, I did it. We got all dressed up in white faces and black outfits and the police were marshaled in front of the door. It was during the week and there were plenty of people there. Everybody was watching from the windows above. There was somber music, and people in ghost-like outfits dropped to the ground. We kept slithering toward the front door and the police line kept moving back. We just kept coming. All I could see was shoes and legs. We were on the ground crawling around like snakes. We managed to get in the front door. It was a powerful demonstration for which we were arrested. We were sentenced to five days in jail if we refused to pay the fine, and of course we refused to pay the fine. Women went to the East End, and the men went to the downtown county jail and then were transferred to Kittanning, where we spent five days. It was very liturgical and ritualistic in the broader sense.”

Fisher always told his congregation about the actions. “I welcomed those experiences as opportunities to preach and teach. I wanted to tell them what I was doing and why, saying ‘This is who I am.’ You could talk about anything in that parish after a while.”

Fisher recalled that Bishop Leonard never said a word about these priests being carted off to jail. “I think down deeply they had a sense of pride that we were involved, and what were they going to do anyway? Clearly, we were on the right side of history.”
Charlie McCollester, a professor of labor history and director of the National Education and Training Center at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, brought labor issues to the table at the Merton Center. "I first got involved around anti-nuclear issues, but Molly's interest in, sacrifices for, and cultivation of the Pittsburgh labor movement, which she has helped unselfishly for decades, with little or no thanks, let the Merton Center become a channel for many causes that helped workers, particularly in plant closings."

McCollester appreciates the inclusiveness of the center. "I was constantly inspired by the openness of the center to the global struggles of workers and the poor. Whether the issues touch Central America, Tibet, Haiti, or the Mon Valley, the shelter for such concerns in Pittsburgh is the Merton Center. At a recent meeting of the Religious Task Force on the Economy, we all turned to Molly to 'do something about Kosovo.' Such a demand was a bit outrageous, but where else should we turn?"

McCollester says his participation goes back decades:

"The (steel) industry had closed down 11 mills in one day, including Youngstown, Aliquippa, and Ambridge. Molly and I went to Youngstown in January 1980, at a request from Staughton Lynd, an activist and lawyer for steelworkers. There was an extraordinary meeting in the union meeting hall, 1,000 people there, shoulder to shoulder. The crowd listened to those congressmen blathering on, and then Ed Mann, a union president, gave an incredible speech, quoting Frederick Douglas, and saying 'We're gonna show America that steelworkers got guts!' The whole room stood up as one, the doors flew open, and people started running down the hill. They left the politicians sitting there...."

"Molly and I went with them, down to the office building of U.S. Steel. The group burst through the office doors and told the secretaries politely that it would be better if they left. We went upstairs in..."
in some people from the Pittsburgh Sisters’ Council, and from Norm’s vision, we created Jubilee Kitchen in the Hill District in 1978.” From the small soup kitchen on the hill, the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank took shape.

“The whole direction of my ministry in fighting hunger grew out of my work at the center,” says Rothermel. “I learned all about media, writing press releases and organizing. The tools were absolutely transferable.”

In the fall of 1986, Michael Drohan, an Irish priest of the Holy Ghost Order at the time, was research director of Duquesne University’s Institute of World Concerns, which dealt with worldwide hunger and poverty. Drohan was heading for a major life change and the Merton Center would be his anchor during the turmoil.

The institute invited Ambassador Robert Duemling, an employee of the State Department’s Humanitarian Assistance office, which oversaw $27 million in “non-lethal” aid allocated by Congress for aid to the Contras. Drohan objected to his scheduled appearance. “The institute was inviting a representative of our government who had declared war on a poor country because they wanted to establish a Socialist government. This contradicted the purpose of the institute. I objected, and informed the president of the university, Reverend Donald Nesti, that I could not be a part of such a thing, and would resign if the ambassador came.”

Duemling came, and Drohan resigned.

“When Duemling spoke,” Drohan recalled, “there were all these people from the Merton Center at the back of the hall, lined up with crosses bearing names of people murdered in Nicaragua. They asked questions which embarrassed Duemling greatly.” Since then, Drohan has been teaching economics in the Pittsburgh area and at Evergreen College in Washington state. Through the center, he met Joyce Rothermel, whom he married.

In 1981, Art and Melanie McDonald set out from New York City to find a place to begin their life together. They had both left religious orders, and wanted to work on peace issues. When they stopped at Pittsburgh, they felt at home. “Merton Center folks were having a picnic,” said Art, “and it just seemed right.” Art, who had spent time in Peru studying liberation theology, took a staff position at the center in 1981, focusing on Central American issues. It
was a time of U.S. involvement with the military in both Nicaragua and El Salvador at the expense of the working class and poor.

McDonald joined with two existing groups to form a local branch of CISPES, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. He is certain that local meetings were infiltrated. The Center for Constitutional Rights sued the U.S. government for violation of their rights and Art’s very large file was included in the suit. Suzanne Polen, who served on the staff at the center during the 1980s, also found she had an FBI file.

The Central American support group in Pittsburgh raised thousands of dollars to offer sanctuary to two Salvadorans, Gabriel and Maria, who were housed in the Mennonite church on Thomas Boulevard. McDonald said, “More than 70,000 people had been killed in the Civil War in El Salvador. We realized our government was not listening to us, and we had to do people-to-people democracy. It was a profound moment, to realize what these people had gone through, and they were placing themselves in our hands.” Gabriel and Maria stayed 15 months, and the Pittsburgh group raised $6,000 to get their nine children here, through a very risky operation.

In spring 1984, 16 people from a center-sponsored group called Witness for Peace went to Ocotal, Nicaragua, on the border of Honduras, and interviewed Nicaraguans about the border raids of the Contras. When they returned, they lobbied, did speaking engagements, and, when needed, participated in civil disobedience.

By the end of 1984, the group had “adopted” San Isidro, Nicaragua, through a Sister City project, and in 1987, Mayor Richard Caliguiri made the affiliation official. With the aid of Global Links, tons of medical aid reached the people of San Isidro. Through Pastors for Peace, truckloads of clothing, pencils, paper, and computers moved in a steady stream across the border. People from San Isidro came here, and many Pittsburghers, including the mayor and Tom Murphy, a state legislator then, used their vacation time to go to San Isidro. The relations lasted until 1990, when the Sandinistas lost in the elections, and Violetta Chimura was elected. “People were really disheartened then,” McDonald said. He is now the pastor of the North Side Unitarian Universalist Church, and Melanie is a Head Start teacher.

Jules Lobel, a New Yorker who came to teach at the University of Pittsburgh Law School in 1985, brought legal expertise to the center’s Central American affiliates.

The World Court had ordered the United States to stop mining Nicaraguan harbors and funding the Contras. The Center for Constitutional Rights, with Lobel as attorney, sued the U.S. in the District of Columbia Federal District Court on both counts, but the charges were dismissed.

Lobel’s connection with the Merton Center was more than political. “I was very interested in the faith-based response to U.S. intervention in Central America, both intellectually and personally. I had interacted with religious people there, and thought the morality of the issue was an important question.”

Although Lobel has moved onto other activities, still challenging the government, he looks back on those years as the high point of his time in Pittsburgh: “The sense of community was really powerful!”

Molly Rush has seen many people come and go, and issues change as well. “My wish for the center as we struggle once again to focus our energies on organizing to fight race and class injustices is that we keep in mind that organizations and campaigns may come and go, but the most important aspect of peace and justice work is the building of relationships among issues, and, most important, among people. The center has sometimes lost friends to misunderstanding, hurt feelings, or disagreement. That, to me, is worse than losing on an issue, because it’s hard to recover that relationship and sense of trust, once broken.

“I think I’ve been in the most interesting place in Pittsburgh. If anyone is working on real change, they are bound to come through our door.”

Bette McDevitt previously wrote “Love Letters from a Chauffeur” for this magazine.