

# *The Zwickels' Pilgrimage: A 40-Year Walk for Peace*

Abraham and Jean Zwickel met on a peace pilgrimage in the early 1940s and have been walking for peace together for the past 40 years. Their shared philosophy of life, which they describe as eclectic — “We steal the best from all religions” — gives them a quiet courage and strength that inspires them to continue their work for world peace. —Photo by Lynne Dobson-Keeble

**By C. L. BEAUNAE**  
**Ledger Staff Writer**

Abraham and Jean Zwickel are a familiar sight at peaceful protests.

Whether it's an anti-nuclear weapons rally or a walk to abolish imperialism, the white-haired, Pittsburg couple can be easily spotted among crowds of young activists, passing out literature and sharing their ideas on peace.

“We are apolitical. We believe the problem of peace is a spiritual problem, not political,” Jean said.

Abe, 79, and Jean, 69, met on a peaceful, interracial pilgrimage 40 years ago.

“It was a walk from New York to Washington, D.C., to protest the Jim Crow laws,” explained Jean.

The year was 1942, and various laws prohibited blacks from eating in “white” restaurants, drinking from public water fountains and sitting in the front of buses.

“We met on the lowest common denominator — our feet. We were walking for peace,” Abe said.

On that pilgrimage, Abe and Jean fell in love. A year later, they were married.

The soft-spoken pacifists have been united in marriage and philosophy for almost 40 years, and the spark of excitement between them is still alive.

"I think that's because we were married on a philosophical basis. The issue binds us together. The issue is peace," Abe explained.

Jean said when she was young, she became a pacifist, and her family thought it was just a stage. "But I challenge young people today, because the older I get, the more convinced I become that this is the right way," Jean said.

Abe was raised in New York in an impoverished Jewish ghetto. Jean was from an upper class Unitarian family.

"A friend of ours told us when we got married, 'Now, you will be Jewnitarians,'" Abe laughed.

"Yesterday, I worshiped at St. Mary's and Jean was with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, but I had a feeling of oneness with Jean," Abe said.

Their shared Philosophy of life, which they describe as eclectic — "We steal the best from all religions" — gives them a quiet courage and strength that inspires them to continue their work for world peace. laws," explained Jean.

"Being discouraged means you feel guilty that you can't take care of everything by yourself. We do our little bit, and others do their little bit, and it adds up to a whole lot," Jean said. "We try to encourage people to multiply the good they see around them."

And they are convinced that progress is being made toward permanent world peace.

"It is rather slow, but if we were in a hurry we would have to be armed revolutionaries. We believe in evolution, not revolution," Jean said.

"People are unaware that whatever good they do ties them together," Abe added. "There is that god-like part in each of us that is united."

They have been on hundreds of vigils and walked thousands of miles over the years and their pace, if anything.

In 1978, for example, they participated in the Continental Walk for Disarmament and Social Justice. On that walk, they met some Buddhist monks who invited them to be part of a Peace walk in Japan the following year.

So, in 1979, Abe, then 77, walked 300 miles across Japan as part of a protest against nuclear weapons. "It wasn't much for me to walk that far, I have big feet," he said with sparkling eyes.

They came to [East Contra Costa County] from [the San Diego area], seven years ago, he a retired chiropractor, she a retired teacher.

They sing in the Pittsburg 50-Plus Choir — and are also affiliated with the Central County Chapter of the Gray Panthers and the Mt. Diablo Peace Center.

Working for the latter, they have spent numerous days of protest outside the Lawrence Livermore National Lab and were involved in the recent investigation into the possibility of nuclear weapons being stored at the Concord Naval Weapons Station.

In July of 1980 and January of 1981, they represented the Mt. Diablo Peace Center at the Pittsburg Post Office, offering counseling to 18 year-old men who were required to register with Selective Service. Abe spent two years in prison during World War II because of his conscientious objection to war.

"We weren't telling them not to register, we were trying to make them aware of the alternatives. We suggested they talk to a counselor or a minister and think about what they were doing," Jean said.

In June, [1982] the Zwickels traveled to New York to take part in Central Park portion of the nationwide June 12 anti-nuclear weapons rally.

"There were close to a million people there. I think the police count was about 800,000, and that was early on in the day. There were also other rallies around the country in the big cities. Altogether, there was probably close to two million people rallying against nuclear weapons," Jean said.

"The government is going to have to listen to the voice of the people," she added.

They also worked on the campaign to pass the bilateral nuclear freeze initiative (Proposition 12 on the November ballot ), and were "delighted" that it passed in eight out of nine states, including California.

In response to President Reagan's statement that communist money was backing the initiative, Jean, said "We are not communists and never have been. We love this country." They say they know of no communists in the movement.

The Zwickels pointed out that many of the people who are opposed to building new nuclear weapons are scientists, religious leaders, physicians and attorneys. "The people opposing these weapons are from all economic and political positions," Abe said.

Before her marriage, Jean was also [a member of the] Harlem Ashram, [an inter-racial, pacifist, Christian community.] As part of [the Ashram], she got to know [Don] Pedro Albizu Campos, the fiery spokesman for the National Independence movement in Puerto Rico during the 40s and 50s.

She introduced him to Abe, and the seed was planted for another concern: independence for what they call a 20th century colony.

The energetic, charismatic couple will be leaving for Puerto Rico on Monday. While they are there, they will be reunited with "the monster" — Their Chevrolet camper-van — and drive around the tiny country, exploring the attitudes of the people toward independence.

"Lately we have been concentrating our energies on our trip to Puerto Rico. There are many people there interested in independence. Our purpose there will be to study and learn and talk to people and bring back what we know to share with our friends," Jean said.

They will in be staying on the island of Vieques, six miles east of Puerto Rico. The island is used by the United States as a military base, specifically for war games. "We (the U.S.) have no right to have a colony," Jean said.

Where do they get their energy?

"We just see these things that need to be done and we do them. This is the fun of living," said Jean.

Now, in what they tenderly refer to as their "last decade," the Zwickels' work for peace continues.