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‘Valve turners’ get warm welcome

by Bennett Hall, in *Corvallis Gazette-Times*



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They didn't look like heroes.

But the so-called “valve turners” — five climate activists who got themselves arrested on Oct. 11 when they broke into oil company control stations in four states and simultaneously shut off pipelines carrying Canadian crude into the United States — got a heroes' welcome from a Corvallis audience Saturday night.

More than 150 people filled the sanctuary at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship to hear a presentation from the five activists, who looked more like unassuming middle-aged professionals than dangerous eco-guerrillas, and a sixth person who was arrested for assisting them.

The crowd stood and applauded when the six took the podium, cheered loudly at several points during the presentation and gave the speakers a standing ovation at the end of the two-hour event.

Moderated by Oregon State University professor and environmental writer Kathleen Dean Moore, the event was sponsored by 350Corvallis.org and the church's Climate Justice Committee as a benefit for the activists, part of a speaking tour designed to help cover their legal fees.

Annette Klapstein, Emily Johnston, Leonard Higgins, Michael Foster and Ken Ward face felony charges ranging from trespassing to sabotage for briefly halting the flow of tar sands oil to show support for the Standing Rock Sioux tribe's efforts to block the Dakota Access Pipeline and to call attention to the growing threat of global warming.

The maximum penalties for the crimes with which they were charged range from 10 years to 51 years in prison.

Ben Joldersma, who acted solely in a support role, could get up to five years behind bars for aiding and abetting the others.

In response to questions from Moore and the audience, most of the activists admitted being scared as they prepared to carry out their symbolic act of defiance. But they all said they saw their actions as a necessary escalation of the battle to halt — or at least slow — the dangerous heating of the earth's atmosphere caused by burning fossil fuels.

"It's not that we're not afraid of what we did and the consequences (of that)," Johnston said. "It's that we're vastly more afraid of climate change."

Far more than fear, Klapstein said, she felt a responsibility to do something to protect the future of her children and all the world's children.

"If you're an older white person, this is your job," she said. "It's up to us to take these risks."

Asked how it felt to actually turn the shutoff valves, Leonard Higgins, a former Corvallis resident who now lives in Eugene, spoke about "that

helpless feeling” he experienced as a parent when he worried about not being able to protect his kids from danger.

“Being able to do something that has a chance to make a difference and maybe bring things around (on climate change), that was just such a wonderful relief,” he said.

Foster talked about being “in the right place at the right moment in history” to take action against global warming. And he drew some of the loudest applause of the evening when he said, “I still can’t believe it. I look at these hands ... this shut off the Keystone oil pipeline!”

Asked if all Americans should feel a sense of complicity in the accelerating pace of global warming, Johnston noted that there are 2.5 million miles of oil and gas pipelines in this country and pointed out that her group’s actions demonstrate that they can be shut off.

“If we allow business as usual to continue, we know where this ends, right? ... We have no choice but to stop it,” she said.

Ward, who spent many years working in mainstream environmental organizations, said those groups bear a large share of the blame for the climate crisis because they’ve shied away from directly confronting fossil fuel companies over global warming.

“We did not go out and try to fight them,” Ward said. “If we had started a fight 20 years ago, we would not be in the situation we are now.”

The activists are hoping to use their trials to make the point that global warming poses an imminent threat to the survival of humanity. To that end, each of them is attempting to use a legal argument known as a “necessity defense,” which Foster said was like someone claiming they were justified in breaking into a burning house in order to save the lives of the people inside.

“The necessity defense is something we’ve been trying to introduce into these cases for climate because there are billions of lives in there, and it’s up to people like us to get them out,” Foster said.

Higgins underscored the urgency of efforts to combat climate change. While dangerous levels of warming are already inevitable, he said, the world can still take steps to cushion the blow.

“We can’t duck the deaths that are already happening and the more to come, but we can at least limit the impacts,” Higgins said.

The presentation ended with an emotional call to action.

“I think now is the time when direct action and civil disobedience is particularly needed,” Higgins said. “We do need to change the concept of what’s politically possible.”

Klapstein stated the case bluntly.

“The oil companies, the fossil fuel companies, are committing crimes against humanity, and I think we have to stop them,” she said.

Klapstein invited the audience to join the fight in whatever capacity they felt comfortable with, whether that meant risking a prison sentence by shutting off a pipeline or simply providing support for those on the front lines.

“There is a role for everybody in this kind of direct, dramatic action,” Klapstein said. “Everybody can play a part.”

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