

## Santa Fe Veterans for Peace founder protested globally

'Ken was basically fearless' in confronting authorities for causes he believed in

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**NEW MEXICAN FILE PHOTO** Ken Mayers, holding a flag, and Charles Powell of Veterans for Peace Albuquerque chapter help lead a Caja del Rio Peace and Prayer pilgrimage through downtown Santa Fe in October.

In the approximately 15 years Ken Mayers and Tarak Kauff knew each other, the two veterans struck a good balance: hot and cold. Kauff is fiery and emotional; Mayers was intelligent, thoughtful and calm.

“But we were both standing for the same thing,” Kauff said.

The pair, both members of anti-war nonprofit Veterans for Peace, traveled the world together, from Japan to South Korea to the Palestinian territories — and often performed a little civil disobedience along the way.

Mayers, a Vietnam War veteran, who went on to found the Santa Fe chapter of Veterans for Peace, died Jan. 27. He was 88.

Over the years, Mayers advocated for action against sexual assault in the military, a freeze on nuclear weapons development and against Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories.

His activism and civil disobedience stretched well into Mayers' 80s. The octogenarian was arrested, along with Kauff, in 2019 for trespassing on an Irish airfield.

They entered Shannon Airport's airfield to inspect and protest U.S. military aircraft that had stopped at the base while on the way to the Middle East — a layover Kauff said violated Ireland's longstanding policy of military neutrality.

Mayers and Kauff were jailed for 13 days, then prevented from leaving the country for several months.

While the two men were stuck in Ireland, they were met with goodwill. They never had to pay for a hotel but were instead housed "like family" by like-minded Irish citizens and asked to speak and join events, Kauff said.

Ultimately, two of the three charges leveled against them were rejected. But they were found guilty of obstructing airport operations, receiving a fine of 5,000 euros — \$5,225 — each.

Within an hour after the trial, Veterans for Peace Ireland founder Ed Horgan and other allies had gathered the funds to cover both men's fines.

"We all felt it was a victory, because the judge didn't expect that we would be able to pay that fine so quickly, and we did," Kauff said. "When we walked out of there, there was TV and press waiting for us ... it was kind of a victory to see that kind of community support and local support ... and people just loved Ken."

That wasn't Mayers' first arrest. More than a decade ago, he and other activists were arrested after handcuffing themselves together at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Plaza in New York City to protest the 13th anniversary of the war in Afghanistan.

Mayers also faced down tear gas and rubber bullets during a 2013 visit to the Palestinian West Bank village of Bil'in to protest repeated tear-gas bombings by the Israeli Defense Forces. Mayers was undaunted.

"Ken was basically fearless in his own quiet way," Kauff said. "I never saw him afraid of anything."

That year, Mayers was selected as one of The Santa Fe New Mexican's 10 Who Made a Difference recipients. The next year, he was declared a Santa Fe Living Treasure. "I am honored," he told The New Mexican over the phone in 2013. Mayers was in the Palestinian territories at the time. "It doesn't seem to me that what I am doing makes a difference. I hope it makes a difference."

For Santa Feans, Mayers may be more recognizable for appearing at a weekly protest against nuclear weapons.

“We get a lot of honks for peace,” Mayers said in a 2014 New Mexican article. “And some drivers give us a one-finger peace sign instead of a two-finger peace sign, but generally speaking, the response is favorable. People thank me all the time for what I’m doing.”

Born in New York, Mayers was exposed to the military from a young age. Both his father and brother served, the former as a Marine and the latter in the Army. At 17, he was awarded a Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps scholarship to Princeton. He graduated with a degree in electrical engineering.

In 1958 — just a few years before the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War began — he began serving in the Marine Corps. He remained on active duty until 1966, and earned the rank of major before radically changing course and resigning his commission.

In a 2007 New Mexican article, Mayers pointed to the Gulf of Tonkin incident as a disillusioning experience that led him to his life of activism. But at other times, he looked back even further. More than a dozen of his family members perished in the Holocaust, he said in a 2013 New Mexican article.

“The lesson I took from that is, no one should ever be oppressed,” he said at the time.

Jay Coghlan, executive director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, said he met Mayers in the small world of anti-nuclear activism. The veteran was always modest, Coghlan said.

“What impressed me so much was that he came back and resigned his commission, out of conscience,” Coghlan said. “That, of course, destroyed his career. It was over. But, therefore, I feel that Ken was just a person of high integrity.”

Mayers moved to Northern New Mexico more than 25 years ago. His wife, Elizabeth Mayers, died of cancer several years after the couple moved to Santa Fe. He is survived by his partner, Pam Gilchrist; children, Bill Mayers and Catherine Fenner; a brother and sister-in-law; and several nieces, nephews and grandchildren, according to his obituary.

After his military career, Mayers taught political science and economics at Bennington College in Vermont. He later moved into the private sector; in 2017, he was honored as the “longest tenured team member” of TAG Alliances. “We are indebted personally to Ken for his unfailing support, loyalty, mentorship and wise counsel, particularly during the transition of the organization to us,” a 2017 post said. “His passion and enthusiasm is contagious, and he continues to inspire us on a daily basis.”

Change, Mayers once told

The New Mexican, could only happen over time — and isn't guaranteed. "There's a chance — and I grant it's a slim chance — that over time we will effect change," Mayers said in 2013. "I've been at this 45, 46, 47 years. I can't say I've seen a helluva lot of progress. But I feel like I have to keep doing it."

A celebration of life will be held at Sandoval and West Alameda streets, where Mayers stalwartly continued his regular protests. The vigil in Mayers' memory will be held at noon April 4. A lunch and service will be held afterward at Unitarian Universalist Santa Fe, 107 W. Barcelona St.