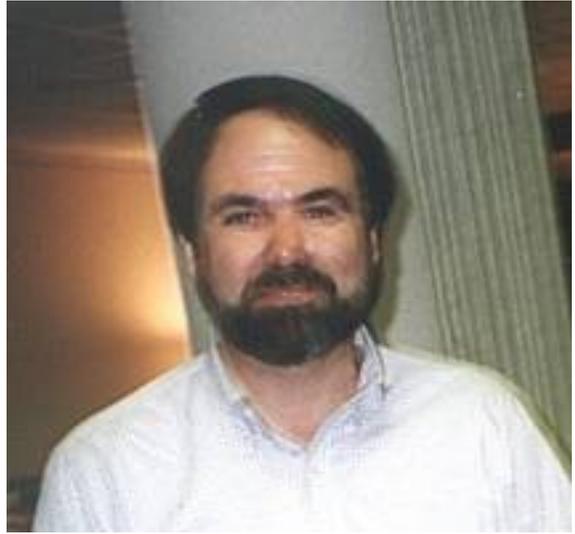


William Ramsey, 1999 Ethical Society of St. Louis Humanist of the Year

William Ramsey Sunday, April 11, 1999: Bill Ramsey has been in and out of jail and in trouble with the IRS. He has fasted for 46 days and has given up a job he loved. But hardships such as these are no match for his convictions. "The adjustments we need to make in our lives to advocate for change are pretty small compared with risking your life everyday in Colombia or Guatemala," says Ramsey.

Born on March 27, 1948, Ramsey wasn't raised in an activist family. And as an undergraduate at High Point College, a small Methodist school in North Carolina, he gravitated to the fraternity house, selling his Bob Dylan albums to pay his dues. But the '60s anti-war lyrics playing in the Greenwich Village coffee houses that Ramsey visited on his college breaks inspired him to march to the beat of a different drummer. He tried to participate in the anti-war march on the Pentagon on Oct. 21, 1967, only to flee at the sight of police using bayonets and clubs.



Then, on April 4, 1968, during a hazing ceremony at a remote cabin in the woods, he heard a radio bulletin—Martin Luther King had been assassinated. When one of his fraternity brothers shouted, "They finally got the nigger," Ramsey grabbed a car and drove away from the site, forsaking fraternity life forever. "The demonstration in D.C. and King's death set me on the path I have followed since," he says.

Ramsey has worked ever since for causes supporting peace and justice, with a particular emphasis on race and poverty issues and anti-war activities. He came to St. Louis in 1980, working for the Catholic Worker Community (he converted to Catholicism in 1983), the St. Louis Economic Conversion Project, and the St. Louis American Friends Service Committee, for which he served as area coordinator for 17 years. Among the activities he helped organize during the 1980s were a nuclear freeze petition and house meeting campaign, sanctuary for Central American refugees, vigils and a campaign to oppose aid to the Contras, Volga River/Mississippi River peace cruises, and support for a community in El Salvador. In the 1990s, Ramsey organized protests against the Gulf War and U.S. Haiti policy.

Ramsey's war-tax resistance, a stand he has held since 1971, prompted action from the IRS beginning in the mid-1990s. When the AFSC office placed Ramsey's taxes in escrow in 1996, Ramsey left the organization. "Tax resistance is the touchstone of my anti-war work," he says. "I treat my resources as a divine trust. To allow any of them to be used to kill another person seems a violation of that trust." Ramsey established the Human Rights Action Service that year. In addition to writing daily protest letters on human rights violations, Ramsey publishes two monthly newsletters. The Buyer's Guide to Human Rights focuses on sweatshops, helping people examine their purchases and dialog with companies; Uncovered: a Monthly Media Watch highlights issues that are ignored by the mainstream press, such as the post-earthquake rampage against human rights workers in Colombia.

Ramsey takes his inspiration from activists around the world who are willing to work under horrendous

conditions. His Christian faith also is a motivating force. "It's a love-hate relationship," he admits. "The Catholic Church is very patriarchal and arbitrary in its exercise of power." He stays, he says, for the same reason he has remained in the United States. "True nonviolence means that you stay and try to work toward a larger truth rather than picking up and leaving whenever you have a disagreement. That requires that you always are questioning your own truth and not assuming that your perspective on the world is always right."