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Interview with Susi Snyder

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Summary:

Susi Snyder describes her journey from studying computer science to activism, where she engaged in nuclear disarmament and indigenous rights, particularly concerning nuclear waste at sites like Nevada’s test site. Her work expanded through positions with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and later PAX, where she focused on humanitarian disarmament and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Snyder reflects on the Dutch disarmament scene, mentioning the Citizen’s Initiative and her success in engaging diverse civil society groups. She emphasizes the continued importance of public outreach to keep nuclear issues relevant and accessible in policy and public domains.This document summary was generated by an artificial intelligence language model and was reviewed by a Wilson Center staff member.

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Michal Onderco: So, Susi, thank you very much for accepting the invitation and for joining us. I want to start with a little bit of understanding how did you get into the field. In preparation for our interview, I looked online about the stuff that you have written about yourself and what other others have written about you. And one of the things that I found is that you've studied computer science and English Literature in college. And then, a few years later, you started being an activist for the rights of indigenous peoples in Nevada against nuclear waste. So how does a computer scientists become an activist for indigenous knowledge?

Susi Snyder: By way of Wall Street. So I studied computer programming and English literature, because it's both right and left brain activity. That spoke to me very well. Still very much love programming, but I'm not as up to date on some languages as I could be. And what happened was when I finished my studies, I began working on Wall Street, I had never seen a person smile in my job. And that sucked. So I left and went to the West Coast. And through that, wound up learning about a lot of other issues that I had not been really exposed to. So issues around indigenous rights, environmental protection. I began, I worked for a short time as a fundraiser for an organization that was working to protect old growth redwoods. So we were going to protect old growth redwoods, which are trees that live for 3000 years. And then I started to learn about the nuclear issue, and realized, "Okay, I'm doing something before in an entity that exists for 3000 years. And I could, in fact, look at something that exists 750,000 years or longer." And let me take my rather unique skill set within this field and see what I can do.

And through a series of adventures, and misadventures, I came to know some of the indigenous people who lived in the area whose traditional homeland was the area that the United States used for on-continent nuclear weapons testing. And that space that used to be called the Nevada test site. Now, it's the National Nuclear Security Administration, or excuse me, the National Nuclear Security Site. It is, you know, it's beautiful. And I fell in love with the place, and the people who are working to protect it. [they] Were passionate, creative, thoughtful, and very welcoming. To an extent, there's a there's always a wait and see. And once I saw the site, and talked to people whose lives have been forever altered because of what took place there, that was it. I couldn't, I couldn't imagine doing anything else.

Michal Onderco: And you became also been active on the around the activism related to the Yucca Mountain storage site. So mostly, was this civilian and the military part always connected in your activism, or did one precede the other?

Susi Snyder: So obviously, the Yucca Mountain storage site was predominantly designed for civilian storage. However, there would also be military storage in there, because it was attached to the, you know, on the side, the edge of the Nevada Test Site. It seen as a 'sacrifice zone' already because of [that testing][1] activity. So, there's always a link between the two. And yeah, and so through the work then there was there was an opportunity to influence decisions around the Yucca Mountain and the siting decision. And so we took it and worked really hard to keep that decision from yet being made.

Michal Onderco: Which hasn't been made up until today.

Susi Snyder: Yes, pretty good.

[1] Points of clarification, or editorial adjustments to clarify meanings, which do not change the meaning, are added within the square brackets (" [ ]").

Michal Onderco: So, there is 2001, you got the prize as a person of the year in Las Vegas. What then?

Susi Snyder: Oh, yeah, well 2001 was a funny year. And I want to preface this, like, my first action with the people that I worked with, Shundahai Network, was around nuclear weapons testing. So just to be clear, it was the test was called Rebound and it was a subcritical test. They said they had been moved from Los Alamos to the test site, because of risks, of a potential full-scale detonation.
And so, the 2001, yeah, the hero of Las Vegas. That was quite exciting. And not least, because I did a professional photo shoot at Red Rock Canyon, which was gorgeous, I learned how to take photos in bright sunshine, which is really neat. And it, it helped open the door to better cooperation with the mayor of Las Vegas, with the City Council. The mayor committed, on the record, that should high level waste come into the city, he would personally go out and arrest the truck driver. We passed legislation within the city, in addition to the work that we're doing overall. All the different sides of it- the work around the rights of those impacted. Yeah, it was work around preventing future harm. And the work to, you know, to stop [the continued harm and recognize the harms already committed]… We did a lot of work around that time to inform people that if this product went ahead, where they lived would be at risk as well. It wasn't just a place in the desert, and try to overcome the NIMBY side of things. So that was pretty interesting. And great.

Michal Onderco: I mean, there was also at the time, the discussion of probably earlier happening in Washington around the CTBT ratification…

Susi Snyder: Yeah, that was earlier that was in '98. So '98, Clinton put it up for ratification, Jesse Helms blocked it, the senator from South Carolina. The CTBT was always part of our conversation. Because it was a good step. But it was never as comprehensive for the people who live near the site. It was not as comprehensive, because it didn't actually stop testing, it stopped explosive testing. But it enabled and gave space for continued modernization, continued development of nuclear weapons, which we're seeing prove out now with the W87 and so on.

Michal Onderco: My question was more at that time, were you connected to people, for example, in academia, or in think tanks, whether on the West Coast or on the East Coast?

Susi Snyder: Yes, there was a national network of those who, who it was a network called Alliance for Nuclear Accountability, it still exists. It was coordinated by a woman who I think she lived in California at the time, Susan Gordon. And she coordinated in the late 1990s. And what that network did was it brought together those who both who are in academia, those who are connected in Washington, particularly for a series of events that took place annually, usually the weekend of or like around the 4th/5th April, in Washington, called "DC days", that would bring those from affected communities to speak to their legislative representatives. So, there's a there's a direct policy link there. And that's also the time that I met Daryl Kimball, I met Zia Mian, Arjun Makhijani, others - Kathleen Sullivan - who were part in, you know, part of bringing that up, as well as being connected to a broad national network. And please understand this is pre-cellphones. This is where, you know, communication by fax was extremely common. A time when websites were primitive at best. And so that idea of being linked nationally with one another, when conference calls were prohibitively expensive was significant. I just want to place, you know, place a little temporal reality in this interview as well.

Michal Onderco: I mean, from what you just said, it was already at that time, not that it wasn't an easy and cheap endeavor. So where did the funding for the activities come from?

Susi Snyder: Great question. We after a bit… Initially, our work was funded by ourselves. And we'd work you know, doing everything from construction jobs to I mean whatever we could do. I shined shoes for two years up at Las Vegas Convention Center. Because I could work for seven-eight days a month and that would be enough, because we lived collectively, we bought in bulk. We ran a Food Not Bombs, these different things. Also, because we were very integrated in the community, in a very underserviced, and resource-poor community. And then we did get some, some funding from the W Alton Jones Foundation, as well as the Seventh Generation Fund. And they helped to kind of support, but it was… W Alton Jones gave us money that was more for staff. So, we're able to actually …

Michal Onderco: Pay people.

Susi Snyder: Pay people. And again, that didn't [mean it was a lot was used on salary, it was project money]. We paid people $400 a month. So, we got a $60,000 grant. And we were able to pay people $400 a month. So to, again, put some perspective on that. And yeah, like for a lot of the work we did we you know, we just did local fundraising, like I got canvassing license in Las Vegas and went door to door, you know, asking people to support the work we did. We had, you know, we did events, we did what community organizers do everywhere.

Michal Onderco: Okay. So, we started this whole segment by saying that 2001 was a funny year. So, in when I was looking up the stuff about you online, I found out that later you ended up in Geneva, working for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. So, what happened between them in Geneva?

Susi Snyder: So, in 2001, with the September 11 attacks, it changed how we were able to do some work, and increased suspicion. The militarism, like "challenging militarism" side of the work became somewhat more difficult. Yeah, understanding in the southwestern US is fairly… there's a lot of military, there's a lot of people who recognize their own illness as a sacrifice for the good of the country, that's a result of nuclear testing and so on.
So, our work shifted with more work in the greater bioregion. So, the Great Basin bioregion, and that included looking at, and eventually stopping, the sighting of a nuclear waste dump at the Skull Valley Goshute reservation, outside of Salt Lake City. And then the individuals changed within the organization. And, you know, when we shifted work. Our landlord in Las Vegas, who had provided the house, that was also our office, that was our community gathering space, he had to sell his house. And that meant that we had to figure something else out. Because it was not a very big house, but it served a lot of purposes.

And so that, that changed things, as well as our operations from Las Vegas into Pahrump, putting them between Pahrump and Salt Lake City, so that we could also do a lot of work on Skull Valley. We helped to open a traditional healing center at the edge of Death Valley. And yeah, and so things were dispersed to a couple of different efforts. And then I decided to come back to New York, which is where my family is. And in the process, learned that Women's International League for Peace and Freedom was hiring, applied for the job.

Michal Onderco: Got your job, moved to Geneva?

Susi Snyder: Move to New York first. So I was in New York, and I worked as the director of the UN Office in New York for a few years. And then there was an opening for the post of Secretary General in Geneva and I applied for the job, got the job. Moved to Geneva.

Michal Onderco: So at the time, who were doing the people that you work most closely with, both in New York and then later in Geneva?

Susi Snyder: In New York, because we were working on a series of projects, this has been like Reaching Critical Will was just new. Reaching Critical Will had been around for two years. So working with UN Office of Disarmament Affairs quite extensively. We're worked with a lot of delegations. There was no openness it was the first online repository for statements that took place. So that archival responsibility was quite important and necessary.

And for our advocacy work we're working with, you know, a great number of organizations. Everybody from the Sisters of Loretto to the Global Policy Forum, we were working with Peter Weiss, or Zia Mian and the folks at Princeton. We were, you know, working through the broad Abolition 2000 network. You know, the Global Resource Action Center of the Environment. And Alice Slater was quite, you know, quite active at the time, some time ago. Cora Weiss, Peter Weiss, also very active at the time. And then because WILPF, it's a huge international grassroots network. So we also maintained connections with WILPF members all over. And so, one of the projects that the project was Peace Women because it was really just a couple years after the adoption, the UN Security Council Resolution 1325. So it's still a lot of work also with the Nordic states, particularly Sweden, because of their interest in that, and that area. And for myself, the work shifted from being primarily grassroots-focused to being more government facing.

Michal Onderco: Do I also understand correctly that the work shifted from being really focused on the nuclear stuff to a much broader agenda?

Susi Snyder: Well, the job was different. Yes. So, the nuclear stuff was always part of Reaching Critical Will, you know, initially was all about nuclear, nuclear weapons issues. And then the, but the agenda was broader. It's, you know, connecting to all the different things that WILPF wanted to work on.

Michal Onderco: So, then you worked on for WILPF, and then you move to the Netherlands. So, what made you move to the Netherlands?

Susi Snyder: I got offered a job by PAX. I had met some people from PAX at a conference in Stockholm, I think. And then I got a phone call out of the blue, and learn that they had raised some money to do a nuclear weapon specific project, would I be interested? I had been working in Geneva with a lot of different issues, which was great, and I loved it. But I was ready for a little something different. And so, I talked to my colleagues in Geneva, even, you know, found three replacements.

Michal Onderco: And so, if it's not too secret, when you got moved to for this project, what was the brief? What was the job that you were given at PAX?

Susi Snyder: I was hired as the program manager on nuclear disarmament at PAX.

Michal Onderco: And was there already at that time, the idea that this will be for example, humanitarian disarmament path? Or was this something that was sort of more broader at that time?

Susi Snyder:

Okay, so I was in the Security and Disarmament department at PAX, which had two things, two big focuses. So, one is around the protection of civilians issues. And, you know, and one was around humanitarian disarmament. So, PAX has been heavily involved in the efforts around the campaign to

ban cluster munitions, have been somewhat involved in the international campaigns to ban land mines. And this is a continuation of that trajectory. And how do we take those ideas, how do we take those experiences from landmines from cluster munitions and apply them to nuclear? So, while it wasn't called humanitarian disarmament, I don't remember when PAX changed the name of the group, the team, but the phrase humanitarian disarmament got quite big. Because when we did the Berlin meeting 2012 2013? That's when the framing start to become much more common.

Michal Onderco: If one looks at the Dutch disarmament milieu, the civil society organizations, it's been predominantly male, old and Dutch. So how did you how did you fit?

Susi Snyder: I am none of those things [both laugh] so already that's different, but what I am is knowledgeable about the issue, knowledgeable about the way things work in international systems. I came with contacts, context, and a plan. And did that.

Michal Onderco: I don't want to sound too disrespectful, so I'm trying to think about how to word this question. Well, are these the things that you found missing in the Dutch context?

Susi Snyder: [Pause] There was an opportunity, right? So, I came in 2010. And so, this was just a few months after the Obama speech in Prague, was less than a year after that. So, it was very clear and very well recognized that there was a new thing happening. And a new thing, plus a new person, it's a good combination, or can be a good combination.

So within the broader Dutch civil society, my impression was people took me as “an unknown, talks too fast, always has too many ideas, has extremely high ambitions, and then pulls things off” person. And I don't know what kind of conversations took place in Dutch around the coffee, because the coffee was often not so great. And I didn't, I don’t, I didn't speak any Dutch at the time.

Michal Onderco: But for example, I spoke with already to some people in the Netherlands, and they, for example, often talk about the discussions around it started in Amsterdam at De Balie, de Balieberaad.

Susi Snyder: Oh, yeah. Yeah. De Balieberaad, it was like a tiny, but the Balieberaad, but for me, it was a tiny afterthought. Because when you look, I mean, it's great. And fantastic. But it didn't entice or invite new people, it was more of the same. And with great access, I mean, brought, you know, brought together people who do that fun dance in and out of between policymaker, and, you know, academic or policymaker and activist. But de Balieberaad, I didn't personally ever participate in the Balieberaad because it was a very Dutch thing. And it was exclusive.

Michal Onderco: By exclusive, you mean?

Susi Snyder: To Dutch people?

Michal Onderco: So, you didn't feel welcome? Or you weren't even invited?

Susi Snyder: PAX was invited. But I wasn't.

Michal Onderco: If you were, if you were the disarmament at PAX, then?

Susi Snyder: No no, I led a team of four people, grow to six people, that is,

Michal Onderco: But you led the team. So if Pax was invited, the way how I would understand it is, it ends up being you.

Susi Snyder: No, invitation didn't come to me.

Michal Onderco: Clear. And, perhaps my last question is: you mentioned that you came to PAX in 2010. So, how do you view development of the Dutch disarmament civil society in the period between 2010 and, you know, we are 6 October 2022.

Susi Snyder: So, I saw in 2010, it was still a very small, primarily academic, space. And that's

Michal Onderco: May I interrupt you there? if say academic space, at that time, there were very few Dutch academics who worked on the issue…

Susi Snyder: We funded at PAX, with in conjunction with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we funded four PhDs. Okay. And that was the Dutch disarmament, nuclear disarmament space. So we built it.

Michal Onderco: Now I understand.

Susi Snyder: It was academic. Okay. So, it was the four PhDs. A couple of professors.

Michal Onderco: Yep.

Susi Snyder: And that was it.

Michal Onderco: And did you do, for example…

Susi Snyder: a handful of holdouts from the Mient-Jan Faber years.

Michal Onderco: I mean, many of these PhDs they ended up going and working for them.

Susi Snyder: They all work for a ministry except for one.

Michal Onderco: I think one works for defense, not for Foreign...

Susi Snyder: They all work for a ministry…

Michal Onderco: I heard "the ministry", sorry.

Susi Snyder: No

Michal Onderco:

isn't Jonathan at the IAEA?

Susi Snyder:

Oh now, but he was at the ministry.

Michal Onderco:

Okay. But for example,

Susi Snyder: Jonathan is the cousin of a girl I went to high school with. Random side note, but cool. A girl who lives in France. It's a small world. [Both laugh]

Michal Onderco: I want to ask something different, which is that, for example, some of the professors who were in charge, I wouldn't consider them people who were would be sharing, for example, the PAX his approach to the disarmament.

Susi Snyder: Not all of them. But there were, you know? Yeah, disarmament was not the priority for all of them. I think we can say that. Some of them very much just like to be in a room and hear themselves talk. But that is a situation across every field.

Michal Onderco: Okay. Now, you said, this was an academic dominated field. What are the developments that you've seen in the 12 years in between?

Susi Snyder: Well, a lot more public outreach, because of PAX's involvement. All of a sudden, we brought the issue to people, bringing it making information available in a non-academic type of language, very friendly, very open language.

Michal Onderco: So that's like Citizen initiative.

Susi Snyder: I was getting there. And we did, we started to do a lot of events that were events in conjunction with the Red Cross, Dutch Red Cross. And we partnered with the Dutch Red Cross, who previously had not been working on the issue. So that opened things up.

And then we did a lot of things with Dutch Red Cross volunteers. We ran contests, to engage young people. And we probably took, we're probably took half the age off of the Dutch disarmament movement and quadrupled the number of people working on it. And so that's, that's always tricky. And it can be uncomfortable when people who are used to having a certain place, all of a sudden, have to cede that place or give space for others.

And then, of course, the Citizens' Initiative was also quite, quite successful. And it mobilized and mobilized thousands, tens of thousands.

Michal Onderco: 46,000 signatures.

Susi Snyder: Well, in order to get 46,000, verified signatures, we collected about 60,000. And so that means 60,000 conversations that took place at events, festivals and train stations. And we also added a bit activism…

Michal Onderco: What do you mean by added activism?

Susi Snyder: Well, we connected with some of the… like when I got here, there was one guy who would do things at Volkel. And he lived in the neighborhood, right one guy? And through the years, there's now a community that meets at Volkel and does protest actions, and it's connected through the through the Catholic Worker, and the Jeannette Noëlhuis in Amsterdam, which is not surprising because Catholic Worker everywhere in the world is very active…

Michal Onderco: PAX has these partially Catholic roots.

Susi Snyder: Yes, PAX Christi.

Michal Onderco: Yes. Did that help?

Susi Snyder: Yes.

Michal Onderco: Okay.

Susi Snyder: And, you know, we have the Bishop of Utrecht involved in things. you know, so what PAX did was used all of society and engaged all of society on an issue and made the question simple. Are nuclear weapons good or are they bad? Because by making it complicated, and this is everywhere I've

worked on nuclear issues, this is the tactic. If you make it complicated you disempower [an already disenfranchised community]. So, in order to empower society to be more active on the issue to engage, we asked much more simple questions. And to be perfectly honest, at the end of the day, that's what it boils down to. It's Jens Stoltenberg saying the threat of using nuclear weapons is unacceptable, like he did to Reuters last week. It comes down to that.

So, the scene changed significantly, but to maintain that level of engagement, it takes a lot of effort. So while there are there is a broad kind of attachment, and awareness of the issue that may not have existed since the 1980s, the opportunities for action are not always so available. And that's one of the difficulties now.

Michal Onderco: I want to move on to something else. But before I do that, I have one last question. Many people in the Dutch disarmament community, I don't want to say they're jealous, but repeatedly remarked that you enjoy very good connections to policy world, especially to the parliament.

Susi Snyder: Mhm

Michal Onderco: And you mentioned already a second ago that, for example, when you came here, you didn't speak Dutch. How did you go about building those connections? If you were a newcomer, in a new country, didn't speak the language.

Susi Snyder: I introduced myself and I asked for meetings. I guess, the second year I was here, we had an opening in our team. And we within PAX, we hired a former parliamentarian, Krista van Velzen, and she had a lot of connections, and we went and did a bunch of meetings together. She also has a personal passion for the issue, including while she was a parliamentarian in 2010, she had a resolution gain majority support that called on the Dutch government to inform the United States that the nuclear task was no longer necessary. And so, there's history. And yeah, and the same way you do, the same way I've done every other place, as you asked for meetings, and you keep asking until you get them.

Michal Onderco: Good. I want to move on to another part. And I asked everyone this question. So how do you view the role of nuclear weapons in the world today?

Susi Snyder: I think they're an unnecessarily complicating factor that has the potential to end life as we know it.

Michal Onderco: And so, do you view, fundamentally, nuclear weapons as a stabilizing or destabilizing factor?

Susi Snyder: Destabilizing

Michal Onderco: Destabilizing. That was the shortest answer I've ever received to this question from any civil society activist. And if you look at the field to nuclear field, what do you see as the biggest failure by civil society since the end of the Cold War? Or in the field in general, so also beyond by civil society?

Susi Snyder: [pause]. I think there was an opportunity to finish, and there is a tremendous movement, from the START, START II, Presidential Nuclear Initiatives to get numbers down from terrifying nuclear weapon highs. And the failure to negotiate and to bring others into negotiations is not a civil society failure. It is not it cannot be pinned to any one thing. But there was there was an opportunity lost.

Michal Onderco: So, you don't think there is anyone who can blame for that?

Susi Snyder: Not as an individual.

Michal Onderco: So as a corporate actor?

Susi Snyder: I don't … I think there are a number of spaces that a number of ways that you can look at it. The 1995 NPT extension conference could have chosen differently, and could have put extreme conditions on the extension that we're not regionally focused. The decisions and the politics within both the Duma and the, the US Congress could have paused the national politicking and you could call it …. personal gains for power, and instead it said, "Okay, let's do this first and then get back to our usual business". And the actors who are responsible for the continued production and maintenance of the weapons could have slowed their roll a bit.

Michal Onderco: By the actors who are responsible, you mean, the ministries of defense?

Susi Snyder: No, contractors

Michal Onderco: The contractors…

Susi Snyder: So, from Rostec, to Boeing, and Lockheed Martin, they could have said, "Wait, you know, this cash cow is drying up, let's move on to other things". And to some extent they did, you know, to some extent. BAE systems only gets three and a half percent turnover now related to nuclear weapon systems, and they're involved in three different systems. So, they have certainly changed. It's not the biggest cash cow. But that trend to shift that business could have been a little bit earlier.
And finally, across civil society, I think so many other issues have come up. And the funding community has also been engaged in so many other issues. And that's, in some ways, I don't want to begrudge anybody their success, because there have been tremendous successes. Since that time, you know, there was a shift in funding community to help former Soviet states to do democratic rebuilding and growth. You know… I personally wish that this particular job had been finished. But then my life would be completely different, because it would have happened before I got to be an adult

Michal Onderco: W. Alton Jones, when they left the field, one of the things they wrote in one of the final publications was that the job has been finished...

Susi Snyder: Yeah

Michal Onderco: …that there is no more work to be done.

Susi Snyder: But we can see, I mean, this year, there's still those who are impacted by nuclear weapons testing, and US nuclear weapons programs. Who are still not included in the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act. It is still discriminatory, it is still problematic, it is still it is still causing health problems. And while you're not going to find somebody climbing out of a person's backyard well anytime soon, there are ongoing contamination issues across the entire field. And it's a global problem. I think that fortunately, now there is a process to at least identify the impacts a little bit more systemically, to set up some support to change and to provide some help, and at the very bare minimum access to the full benefit of human rights, which has been historically problematic and challenging.

Michal Onderco: I said at the beginning, when we look at the field, we see sort of very different actors in it, and we see the activist or we see, think tanks of academics, we see founders. How do you

perceive the role of all of these actors in the field? How do you, for example, view the role of think tanks? How do you view the role of academia? How do you view the role of funders?

Susi Snyder: I have a hard time putting them into blobs, I think they honestly some think-tanks are different than others.

Michal Onderco: Can you elaborate more on that?

Susi Snyder: I mean, I think that's pretty clear. Right? So, they, you know, each of them have a role. And some play that role differently than others. And I'm hesitant to make generalizations about them as groups.

Michal Onderco: Okay, let me put it differently. When you think about, for example, partners to engage with? And if you look at, for example, the think tanks or at academia, or funders, what do you find, either as important factors for you to consider a partner, or on the other side, what are the red flags for you not to even look at the direction?

Susi Snyder: So shared interests are very important for partners.

Michal Onderco: Can I interrupt you there? So, I had another interviewee who said that their interest is to make sure that there will be no more nuclear explosions in the history. And that even the people, who are you know, the force posture planners at Joint Chiefs of Staff share that goal.

Susi Snyder: Okay, so they have a shared interest.

Michal Onderco: Yes.

Susi Snyder: That's what I just said.

Michal Onderco: I do not think you would consider force posture planners at the Joint Chiefs of Staff to share an interest…

Susi Snyder: To share the interest to make sure that nuclear weapons are not used? Why, why do you make that assumption?

Michal Onderco: Okay, so what is your interest? Then you say, because you are looking for actors who share your interest? Is your interest that nuclear weapons are never used? Or is it that they are banned? Or is it that

Susi Snyder: They are banned! Let's be clear! There's international legal instrument that makes them illegal, that prohibits them, they are banned! My interest is that they are completely abolished. And the process to get from here to there involves many actors, and many stages and steps. And some of which may not appear in a straight line. And the decisions of when to step right or step left are very context-specific. And I'm not willing to generalize.

Michal Onderco: So coming back to the point when we had about shared interests, so that interest is the abolition or is it the fact that the weapons are never used? Or is it that the victims are … or is it context specific? Is everything context specific, project-specific?

Susi Snyder: [Pause] My interest is the abolition of the weapons. And that the process of that includes identification and remediation of harms caused by the weapons.

Michal Onderco:

In the past, that continue up until today?

Susi Snyder: So the identification and remediation of harms caused by the weapons.

Michal Onderco: Good. So you look for partners who share that goal…

Susi Snyder: Who have a shared interest that leads to that goal. That interest might be short term, it might be long term. But there are, as I said, there are many … it's clearly not a short road. I've been doing this for 25 years. And it's very context specific. What partner works in what particular situation to get to that goal.

Michal Onderco: Okay.

Susi Snyder: So the interest helps decide make decisions around who is who's, who becomes a partner in this process.

Michal Onderco: And do you tend to work primarily, with same people repeatedly, more frequently? Or would you say that it's, it's a process where there is a lot of turnover of partners, in your work?

Susi Snyder: It's a combination. Because…yeah, it's combination, I would say. And there are always new, and it's always a mix.

Michal Onderco: Okay. And so... is there anything that you would say makes beyond the shared interest? Is there anything that you think makes for a good partner, whether it's a think tank or whether it's an organization?

Susi Snyder: Contents and reliability, you know, a certain level of predictability? I'd say.

Michal Onderco: What do you mean by predictability?

Susi Snyder: Knowing that it's, it's the like, knowing that what's promised can be delivered. So, it's an assurance.

Michal Onderco: that's the track record or something …

Susi Snyder: Track record. Yeah, that's another way to put it. Not working with somebody who says "oh, I can I can open doors to nine senators' offices", and then they've never been in the building, right? For example.

Michal Onderco: The other question that I have is, one of the things you mentioned about your activity PAX was that your staff has grown and you've been also in leadership positions within ICAN when ICAN has also grown. So, what do you look for in people when you hire them?

Susi Snyder: [Pause] Potential. [Pause] So you can see what person… you can see by person's experience what they have done. But what they will do is something that comes across through... It's more it's more of, I am trying to find the right word for this, it's informed by their enthusiasm, attention to detail. And a little bit of fearlessness, a little bit of willingness to try something, to try something, to try things,

Michal Onderco: New things?

Susi Snyder: Don't need to be new things, they can be things that were tried before. But a willingness to try certain things, you know, willingness to experiment, and to learn from experience. So, in my

interview process, I always ask, what is the thing that what's the worst thing you've ever did? And what did you learn from it? It's a terrible question, because it makes people very uncomfortable.

Michal Onderco: So if I can flip the table, what's the worst thing that you need? And what did you learn from it?

Susi Snyder: In my professional life, one of the worst things was addressing ambassador I didn't know very well by their first name in a formal communication. And what I learned from it is … it was also with my board, several of my board members at the time were copied on it. And they were very upset by it. The ambassador was not. And what I learned by, I was chastised by my board for it, and what I learned is that my own judgment sometimes can supersede protocol. And it was, it wasn't maybe the worst, but it was certainly not a good moment. Because I had a very severe comeuppance, delivered by my board.

Michal Onderco: And there was a time when you were leading the board of ICAN.

Susi Snyder: No, this was when I first came to WILPF's New York Office. Okay, because that was the way I had worked with congressional staff. That was the way I had worked with city officials. That was the way I work. If you're friendly with somebody, you have a good relationship, you address each other by first name.

Michal Onderco: So, I find it interesting that in your description of what you are looking for in staff, you didn't mention, expertise…

Susi Snyder: You learn, people learn, things. Like I, I've always hired smart people, whether they knew the issue, was not the priority, they can learn an issue. hire smart people so that they can learn an issue. And maybe in the process of learning the issue, they will see something that is an interesting opportunity that an expert may have ruled out. That's not to say I dismiss expertise, because expertise is extremely valuable. And it's something that in some partnerships you very much look for. But in my eyes, there's a mix, it's not the top thing on my list.

Michal Onderco: How would you define impact?

Susi Snyder: How would I define impact?

Michal Onderco: In this field. And some people find it difficult to define with impact. You can also define it by giving an example.

Susi Snyder: Okay. Changing a conversation. And in order to focus, like a significant impact that we've had in this field has changed in the conversation to focus on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. And doing so the impact, the impact has included an international treaty. The strongest multilateral condemnation of threats to use nuclear weapons that has ever been issued. And the Secretary General of NATO saying that those same those threats to use nuclear weapons are unacceptable, something that no previous Secretary General of NATO has ever been in a position to say. So the action was changed in conversation, the impact is still playing out.

Michal Onderco: So, who delivered that impact. Is there a single person?

Susi Snyder: I just gave you three examples who delivered the impacts.

Michal Onderco: But when you say, for example, there was a change in conversation about nuclear weapons in terms of talking about their humanitarian impact and humanitarian cost? I have, for this project, so far, I spoken with six people, three of them claimed that it was them who changed the conversation.

Susi Snyder: Sure. Great. It was not one individual. And you know, the history books will cite whoever's writing, whoever the historian that's writing it will choose. This was a collective effort, all societal change is a collective effort. And nobody can pinpoint the exact moment that change becomes possible.

Michal Onderco: Do you think there is any change or impact that can be pinpointed to, for example, a single organization or single actor? If you were… for example, the Citizens' Initiative that was very successful in the Netherlands? And would you say that that's something that can be pinpointed to PAX?

Susi Snyder: Well, it was not an initiative only of PAX. Okay, so it was an initiative of PAX, the Dutch Red Cross, and ASN Bank. And those three entities together dedicated resources, and effort to make it happen. If I want to give credit to, to an individual, I would give it to two: Krista van Velzen and Selma van Oostwaard, who made that possible. But within it, neither of them were working alone. And it was within the context that they had helped shape and create. And similarly, there, you know…it's somewhat irrelevant, who had the idea in the first place.

Michal Onderco: Why?

Susi Snyder: Because the person who has the idea is not [necessarily the one who does the full job of implementing] it, in my experience, whose idea it was is forgotten in the process of the implementation. And so, what matters is that there was an openness to hear, and implement, and act on that idea. And this is a very, it's a very feminist approach, if you will, it's nonhierarchical. And that's something that I understand is uncomfortable for a lot of people. Because it is much more diffuse than a simple yes, no, yes, no, yes, no.

Michal Onderco: So, we started talking about impact, and related questions about defining success. And part of the reason why I'm asking about these two things separately is because very often you can have impact in terms of, as you mentioned, changing the tone of the conversation so far. But at the end of the day, people will debate whether that has led to… whether that was successful or not in the end in achieving whatever, broader goals. And the question for you is, is success, the same as impact, for you? Or is success something else?

Susi Snyder: Well, it sounds more like is it a tactic or is it a strategy question? Right? That's another way of looking at it, and impacts our results of tactics, and success as a result of a strategy. Okay. So, you take a number of tactical moves to implement a strategy that is longer term and broader, and that you often are not in a position to judge the success. I cannot judge the success of the work that we have done because to me, it's not that yet.

Michal Onderco: Okay. So that's actually very interesting because other interviewees that talk to you, for example, said TPNW is a success.

Susi Snyder: It is a very great thing. It's a great achievement. For me, and my personal goals, there still exist nuclear weapons in the world; there still exist those who are impacted by those weapons who

have not been recognized, who are still restricted from achieving their, you know, from access to their full human rights, who have no remedy. The TPNW is a tremendously helpful tool to fix those problems. In fact, it's the only international legal instrument that offers any hope. But until the goals are fully achieved…we'll have to see whether it's a success.

Michal Onderco: Yeah. You very recently published an op ed with Anne-Marie Slaughter. Congratulations. Does publishing something like this… Why does it matter for a person like you? How does it how does it fit into either strategy or tactics?

Susi Snyder: Did you just answer your own question?

Michal Onderco: Okay

Susi Snyder: because you just congratulated me on something that, you know, is showing what you consider valuable. So, it matters to you.

Michal Onderco: Okay.

Susi Snyder: And that at the end of the day, it matters to you. And that's helpful for me.

Michal Onderco: Yeah, but I am nobody.

Susi Snyder: You're somebody who's doing a project with the Wilson Center, you're interviewing me, because I'm, you know, what did you call it? One of the most important people on this field, so it matters to you to help give me that.

Michal Onderco: In the greater scheme of things, academics generally consider themselves not to be too important.

Susi Snyder: Sure. Okay. Man, really?

Michal Onderco: I mean, one of the things that academics generally are unhappy as it's that they have very little impact on the way our policy works.

Susi Snyder: That's because they don't engage in it. They engage in an analysis of it from outside.

Michal Onderco: But how does it matter? Also, your goal is probably not to influence me.

Susi Snyder: No

Michal Onderco: How does writing an op-ed with Anne-Marie Slaughter, how does it help your goals?

Susi Snyder: Well, there are two things, that particular op-ed. So first off, it enabled me to have a really honest and straightforward discussion with Anne-Marie about the issue. And it's an issue that she has had some connection with over the years, but not hugely. And we had a very intense conversation several times in the process of writing that. So that was very useful, because she operates in a different circle than I do. So, by doing this, the conversation that we had ripples out to both of our circles, I learned some things, I'm sure she learned some things, because the end result was different than what we had envisioned. That is very helpful.

And secondly, those kinds of pieces provide additional credibility for the other work that, you know, I do. It doesn't, it doesn't hurt to have a Project Syndicate op-ed out there. And it can, you know, it leads to other opportunities, other conversations, and that leads to change.

Michal Onderco: If it's not a secret, was it you reach out to her? Or did she?

Susi Snyder: She reached out to me…

Michal Onderco: And said, I want to write something about…

Susi Snyder: Nukes. It's in the news. Let's do something.

Michal Onderco: Okay. I have a few questions to wrap up our interview. The first one is, where do you see the field going in the next 50 years?

Susi Snyder: It's really hard to say. There are threats to use nuclear weapons that are higher than ever before. I am personally more scared than I have ever been working on this issue. So it's very hard for me to predict anything right now.

Michal Onderco: Do you think in 50 years, there will be still nuclear weapons?

Susi Snyder: I don't think so.

Michal Onderco: Why?

Susi Snyder: Because there's two choices here. They get used in the near term, they get used in the long term, they get used by accident. One of the guys who takes a bunch of LSD at Minot decides "[expletive] it" and uses a broom and turns the keys. Like, there's a lot of possibilities. It's such an irrational thing. It's an irrational tool. It complicates every situation. And so that's the choice either use it or lose it. I don't think 50 years [can go by without either choosing to get rid of them or watching them get used]. I think there's so many other issues that we're dealing with. We don't have 50 years. to, frankly, to [expletive] around with this. It's 50 years is that that's, honestly, I can't see it.

Michal Onderco: How do you imagine security…Imagine there's a world without nuclear weapons…

Susi Snyder: I do all the time? I'd have to, because if I want to build it, I have to think of what it looks like.

Michal Onderco: How does security in post-nuclear world look like?

Susi Snyder: Well, for one, the baseline is equity and human rights. I think that's the biggest thing, the current system of exploitative capitalism is shifted. And what has been a historic white western domination of capitalism [generated from the sweat and labour of those with less political power]. The systems of political power represented in a world of the systems of capital are shifting, so we see a Nigeria with a lot more influence in the world, we see China having a lot more influence in the world. And then ambition is, you know, to kind of keep, to find a way to move from here to there that does protect and enable to human rights. And that's a challenge. Very interesting, very difficult challenge. But the world that we're moving to is one in which the current structures, the current structures are not sustaining. Look at what's happening in the General Assembly, as we speak, the United States whipping votes from Barbados, Timor-Leste, in order to get support for a resolution because the Security Council has failed. And a system where five countries hold power over international peace and security is not sustainable.

Michal Onderco: So that's changed your thinking post nuclear world. There will be no Security Council or will it be irrelevant? Or will it be reformed?

Susi Snyder: It won't look the way that it looks right now.

Michal Onderco: Okay, so it will be reformed formally.

Susi Snyder: Yeah.

Michal Onderco: Okay. Do you think that there is a place for the idea of deterrence in the post-nuclear world?

Susi Snyder: Well, deterrence has been around since you know, people picked up sticks.

Michal Onderco: Okay. So how is deterrence provided in a post nuclear?

Susi Snyder: Well, we will probably be much more tied to, you know, other threats, including threats around information technology, surveillance technology, and so on, because that's what is, that's what deters action now, much more than nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons, as I said before, they're irresponsible, and they're highly complicating and unnecessary. And in a post-nuclear weapons world, I could imagine systems of deterrence may take place through conventional or non-nuclear weaponry, they also could very well take place through other technologies. I mean, it's very easy to shut down the entire national economy right now. With the right tools.

Michal Onderco: Okay. my very last question is, do you think that that world will be more stable than the world we see today?

Susi Snyder: Do you think the world today is very stable?

Michal Onderco: Not really. But the question is, do you think it'll be more stable?

Susi Snyder: I think that we'll be dealing with, and we're coming into a time on this planet, for dealing with catastrophic climate change. And that is a destabilizing factor that we didn't have to consider and wasn't considered at the advent of the nuclear weapons era. So if you're asking me if I think the absence of nuclear weapons is a destabilizing thing, I do not. If I think the world is moving towards a more destabilized place. It might be. But I don't think that's because of nuclear weapons.

Michal Onderco: So, okay, that answers later. Well, my question is always close these interviews by saying, “Is there something I should have asked about and I didn't”?

Susi Snyder: [Pause] Let’s see

Michal Onderco: Now the question came to my mind. So, in 2017, if I'm not mistaken, you won Nobel Peace Prize together with the rest of ICAN?

Susi Snyder: Yep.

Michal Onderco: How did that fact influence the activities of ICAN? Except that it gave you a million dollars to, as one of other interviewees said, to finally pay the staff respectable wages?

Susi Snyder: That was definitely that, it definitely started to open doors that were previously closed, but not everywhere.

Michal Onderco: So where did doors and where did it not open the doors?

Susi Snyder: Well, the path that we had laid out, the promise that exists within this treaty was legitimized even further. I think that was very useful in opening some doors. And it also, it was a great challenge. And it was very made very clear, like, this is not the “this is not the congratulations, you can retire, here's a gold watch”. This is a “okay, you build something. Now use it, make it work. This isn't

the end". And for ICAN it has not been the end. A lot of people wanted to join the campaign, we took, we took a few months pause on accepting new memberships in order to enable us to make sure that people weren't just going to be "I wanna be part of them". And I think that was a very good thing to do.

Michal Onderco:

So, do you think that if ICAN didn't receive the Nobel Prize, do you think that it would have made, for example, the entry into force of the treaty less likely?

Susi Snyder: Well, okay, it's, it's very hard to conjecture, because we also had a pandemic. So, the fact that this treaty entered into force, in a time where heads of state weren't traveling, to give signatures. Like, you know, to understand that to sign a treaty, you have to physically go to the office in New York to sign a treaty, your head of state or the person that's been designated authority. So, for like two years, that was not possible. Ratifications were challenging. Parliaments didn't meet across the planet. And now there were pauses everywhere. So, and then there are urgent the urgency of dealing with the fact that millions of people have died from a pandemic that exposed tremendous systemic inequality. Yes, and continues to do so. So, all of those things are part of the question. Did the Nobel Prize help us get to enter into force? Possibly. But I think I'm still hugely impressed that we're able to achieve the entry into force, so rapidly. When you consider the last nuclear weapons related to instrument international instruments still hasn't gotten there. It's thirty years. So yeah, so… Did it help? Perhaps.

Michal Onderco: I mean, you mentioned that there was also an influx in interest in ICAN, others have have wanted to join. Shortly before ICAN got the new president, Beatrice Fihn, did the operations of ICAN change? Because one of the things that I'm some say, and this has also been published in other papers, that ICAN basically now works slightly differently than many other traditional activist outfits. It's way more organized way, more professional. There is organized... organized is I think, a good word. I do think that that has something to do with the fact that there is so much more interest after the Nobel Peace Prize, or would that be the same without? Or do I completely disagree with that assessment?

Susi Snyder: Oh no, although I do think ICAN is more than the sum of its parts, but its parts are huge. Okay, so it's 650 partners, and 110 countries, like it is not a small thing. And primarily, what ICAN staff do is share and amplify the work of our partners. Our partners, by being part of this broader network have also increased their visibility, their ability, and we've been challenged, to do better, and to keep doing better. And since the very beginning, since we did the first international launch, in April 2007, when we launched ICAN in Vienna. Since that moment, ICAN has consistently looked to how are others, not solely within the disarmament or humanitarian fields, but how are others who are shaping society doing so? What can we learn? How do we make sure that our partners have what they need to be the best? At what they do.

Michal Onderco: Is there any particular organization that you would say, has been a particular source of inspiration? In that sense?

Susi Snyder: There's so many honestly, like, there's so many interesting ways that people are, are looking to shape society, if you look at, you know, work around whole efforts for feminist foreign policy. It's been fascinating, very interesting. You look at the RISE movement, similarly, quite powerful, quite interesting. You know, look, there's both those who are shaping society for the better, and look

at those who are seeking to restrict some of the societal gains that we've, we've seen over the years. Like ALEC.

Michal Onderco: What is ALEC?

Susi Snyder: ALEC is a US organization that provides legislative examples, for restrictive policies around human rights, women's rights, things like that. Look at the Sackler family, you know, look at their [way to shape thinking and society, how does that happen and what can we learn]. One of the things that the staff do and other partners do is we are like, particularly with such a broad partnership, we are in so many different spaces, that we're getting things from other spaces and sharing it and feeding it back and saying, “Hey, this worked here. Let's try it there.”

Michal Onderco: And how do you balance these… So you have this network of 600 plus organizations, there is a board..

Susi Snyder: A steering group

Michal Onderco: Steering group, and then there is the office.

Susi Snyder: Mhm

Michal Onderco: How do you sort of balance between these different bodies? Because there are some organizations where, for example, the executive office sort of sees the board as someone who is maybe a source of wise counsel, but that shouldn't necessarily intervene in the daily operations. There are others who basically… there's often a source of tensions between … between constituents and boards and executive council. How do you deal with that?

Susi Snyder: Tension is great, because tension, tension - conflict challenges us to find solutions. And, you know, it's everybody's got, everybody plays different parts, and those parts are changing, but they're not always the same.

Michal Onderco: So can you give me an example of where the tension has led to something that ICAN does better now?

Susi Snyder:

Let’s see. [Pause]. OK, so there are tensions about how our, how our talking points developed. So, you know, people who work, who wanted to be involved, there’s space made be involved. Okay, let's talk about it. Let's make sure that things work, work out. And so, there's been a creation space and because of that, then the result is [better, more than the sum of the parts]. Um, it's got that broad information. And it's, you know, it's more effective.

Michal Onderco: It's interesting, you mentioned talking points, because that assumes some sort of centralization, right? Or at least coordination.

Susi Snyder: Of course, there's coordination! That's what a staff team does! Okay, the global campaign, that's how campaigns work. it’s how any campaign works. And, you know, that's the staff team helps, again, facilitate information in the movement, amplify the work that partners do. The different initiatives and projects that come out, are, you know, frequent, they're predominantly partner-driven, partner-led, and then they're facilitated and amplified and encouraged. And we suggest, and, you know, do provide options, we provide space, as a staff, provide space for people to work to do their

ICAN related work to the best of their ability with the best information, you know, and the best connections they can possibly have. Because our success is not our success. It's the success of partners.

Michal Onderco: So, I mean, in my own scholarly work, we've worked mainly with documents from governments and from diplomatic documents. And very often, when governments agree on certain talking points, that also means that you expect others to stick to them, and not to go out and sort of freelance sort of otherviews, and so on so forth. Would you say that this is the same within ICAN?

Susi Snyder: You're asking me about message discipline, because that's what it is, isn't? In political parlance, right. That's messaging discipline. And what we do is when it comes to talking points, they're provided as a resource, but we don't expect or command them to be to be used, but simply as a resource. And for some organizations, like, for example, some of our partners in Italy *Rete disarmo*, right? They work with a small staff, they work on 10 significant issues. And sometimes it's super helpful to have things. Sometimes it's not. You know, sometimes it's better for colleagues in Burkina Faso. Sometimes, you know, it's sometimes it works in Argentina. Sometimes it doesn't, because of historical issues, or whatever. That's, that's for our partners who know the context locally the best to ascertain, we can't know every context. And, again, it's a resource, and we want to, we want to make sure that because we're talking to so many people. Not forget not all of our partners have time to talk to everybody.

Michal Onderco: You mean, what do you mean by talk to everybody, within the movement?

Susi Snyder: Yeah, but we're, you know, what we're doing is where we're trying to make sure…, or you know, make connections where they're beneficial. And just to emphasize, again, facilitate the success, our partner success is our success.

Michal Onderco: Can I ask a different question? So, you have partners, as you mentioned, in 110 countries. Many of them are in countries where, for example, civil society, you would be would be hard pressed to find someone who is an expert on nuclear weapons, who sort of spends their, you know, five days a week, eight hours a day working on nuclear weapons?

Susi Snyder: Sure. But they're an expert on something that nuclear weapons affect.

Michal Onderco: Okay. That's what I want to that's where I want to get. So, for example, someone working… recently DRC ratified TPNW and you tagged the NGO on Twitter, and I went to their site and look them up, and they do a lot of work on peace and security. But they do comparatively less work on nuclear.

Susi Snyder: Sure. So not everybody can work on nuclear.

Michal Onderco: Exactly. My question to you is, what kind of dynamics does that lead to within the movement? Does it lead to the fact, for example, that they lean more on these resources that provided from the headquarters or does it lead to what? Yeah, so what are the consequences of that?

Susi Snyder: Well I think it's really case by case, honestly. And so, it's very context specific because we're dealing, with you know, the 201 countries that have the possibility to ratify this treaty. Right? So, you have 193 that are UN members, and you have the other eight that are that are observers who are not members. 201 countries that have the possibility to ratify. Our partners are operating in some contexts where they work on human rights issues that are directly impacted by, let's say, British

nuclear testing, or French nuclear testing. And so they're dealing with that as a component of a post-colonialist movement. For example, or human rights efforts.

And in those situations, they bring an expertise to the campaign of that particular context, of those specific challenges, which are informed both by research, by lived experience and so on. And that helped to make everything within the campaign better. Sometimes, if it's a far-removed issue, it's not like the whatever talking points that we, you know, put together as a resource are not a burden. That's fine. It's not a problem to not use the email. And I don't think that it's... I don't think it adds any tension. Overwhelmingly, our response from our partners is always "Okay, great". Sometimes they use it, sometimes they don't. And that's what it is. That's, that's a broad and inclusive campaign has to be like that. Because we cannot possibly know what is the magic ingredient everywhere.

Michal Onderco: Thank you.