

War protester anxious over sentencing

By Teresa Chamberland Special to The Denver Post The Denver Post

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DeAnn Major is a child advocate at a local nonprofit, believes passionately in civil rights and free speech, and hopes to make the world a better place by the time her son grows into a man.

She's also facing up to six months of jail time and as much as \$1,500 in fines for trespassing while trying to stop the war in Iraq.

On Wednesday, Major, 39, will be sentenced, along with 11 other people, for actions in an anti-war demonstration that even the police say was "very peaceful."

In early June, a Jefferson County jury of six convicted the entire group of the misdemeanor crimes of third-degree trespassing and obstruction of a passageway. The group had been arrested in November after organizing a protest against the Iraq war in front of the Armed Forces Recruitment Center in a shopping center at 215 S. Sheridan Blvd.

Though the group was tried and convicted together, County Judge Charles T. Hoppin will sentence the 12 protesters individually. With a prior conviction related to a demonstration at the White House, Major could be subject to a more severe penalty than the others.

"Whatever sentence we receive, I hope people will take to heart that average citizens are willing to take a risk," Major says.

Major has tried to mentally prepare herself for the worst. Her earlier conviction, for not having a permit while gathering at the White House with other demonstrators, resulted in a \$75 fine. She worries that case will be used against her.

Major is mostly concerned for her 15-year-old son - for whom she requested anonymity - should she be put in county jail. A divorced single mother, she has arranged for the boy's father and extended family to care for him.

To Major, six months is big price to pay for two hours of protesting, but she says she would do it again because it would be a "crime to not do anything."

Versed in the teachings of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, Major says she and the other demonstrators came together as concerned citizens to protest the war.

"This is how I feel about this war: It's immoral, it's illegal, and it is our duty as citizens to air our grievances and abide by international law," Major said.

More than 50 people arrived at the Armed Forces Recruitment Center on Nov. 18. Groups across the nation demonstrated at recruiting centers as part of National Stand Down Day, a project of the Iraq Pledge of Resistance's National Campaign for Nonviolent Resistance.

Major said the local group notified the Lakewood police of the protest Nov. 17.

"When we arrived at noon, one of the officers told us that the recruiting office was closed for the day due to a training, and we could protest as long as we would like and not be arrested," Major said.

Steve Davis, spokesman for the Lakewood police, said the recruitment office was closed for most of the day.

He also confirmed that the protest was peaceful, but after a recruiter opened the building, the protest began to affect the officer's ability to work.

Major said that while they stood in front of the doorway, the recruiter was able to pass through the crowd easily.

Officers asked the group to move back away from the door of the building three times or be arrested. The larger group of protesters moved away, leaving 12 people standing in front of the building's entryway.

"There was a group of people there whose core objective was to be arrested," Davis said.

He said Lakewood officers arrested the 12 remaining demonstrators, who complied without resistance.

Major says the group will not appeal the conviction, even though some Colorado case law from a decision involving a Westminster mall suggests that a shopping plaza may be a public area where protest is constitutionally protected.

"It all depends on the case," said Colorado Supreme Court Justice Michael Bender. "It's a subjective interpretation of the law."

The other protesters to be sentenced are between the ages of 27 and 85.

They are: Todd Bowen and Betty Goebel of Arvada; Carolyn Bninski, Janet Roberts and Ellen Stark of Boulder; Drew Edmondson, Scott Foreman and Claire Ryder of Denver; Richard Conn and Cheryl Distaso of Fort Collins; and Bonnie McCormick of Louisville.