

W. Pittsburg house provides quiet shelter for protesters

By Jeannie Look

Staff writer

WEST PITTSBURG — The only pickets at the Peace House are part of the fence bordering the front yard.

The modest 3-bedroom house doesn't look much different from other homes in this quiet West Pittsburg neighborhood, but to a dozen or so members of the Nuremberg Actions Committee it's a comfortable suburban hideaway.

Purchased in December by peace activists, it is a home base for protesters who've been conducting daily vigils outside the Concord Naval Weapons Station since June.

"This is great," said Chris Bankert, an 18-year-old peace activist who dropped by after several long shifts on the picket line.

A hot shower and a good night's sleep were a welcome break for Bankert, who's been camping outside the weapons station since October.

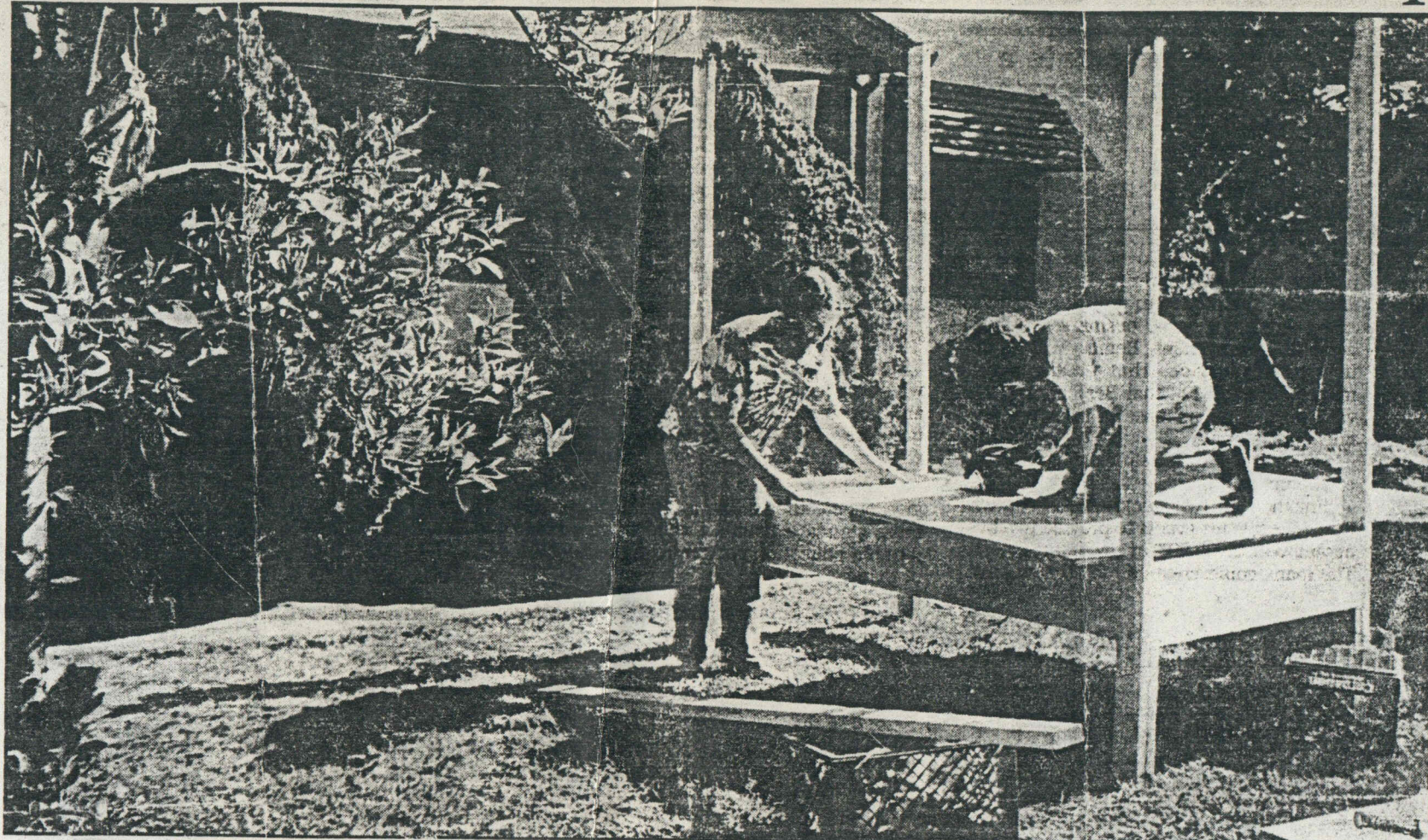
"We can come here and cook a hot meal, take a shower and relax," she said. "The time goes by very quickly at the tracks, but the nights can get very long sometimes."

Inside, there's an eclectic mix of donated furnishings — a large painting of a city scene, overstuffed pillows and a worn tweed sofa.

Besides sheltering weary protesters, the Peace House will be used this summer for potluck dinner meetings, non-violent protest training and other events.

Many neighbors say they haven't noticed much extra activity since the protesters arrived.

Before the house was bought in December, the protesters' nearest support base was the Mount Diablo Peace Center in Walnut Creek.



Staff photo/Meri Simon

CHRIS BANKERT AND SPAULDING BROOK, both 18, build a bed on the front lawn of the Peace House in West Pittsburg.

A permanent center became crucial when the sporadic daily protests against weapons shipments to Central America turned into a 24-hour vigil on Sept. 5, four days after protester Brian Willson was run over by a Navy weapons train.

Scott Rutherford, a member of

the Nuremberg Actions Committee and a friend of Willson's, thought the best way to help sustain the lengthy vigil would be to establish a central location where protesters could meet, organize and rest.

A retired federal worker, Rutherford, 54, volunteered to make the

biggest investment. He said he financed the down payment on the Peace House by selling property he owned in Maryland.

Rutherford, a relative newcomer to the peace movement, said he has no qualms about sharing his home with other peace activists.

draining.

On occasion, people driving by the weapons station heckle the protesters with comments like "Get a job" and "You're just a bunch of communists," he said.

"But it just shows their ignorance of what we do," Beck said. "I don't know of any communists in the group."

He said the best way to address heckling is to be open to discussion.

"The other night, a group of teen-agers came over and started talking to us," Bankert said. "One said he was a (George) Bush supporter, and another said he was a Christian who supported the Contras in Nicaragua."

Bankert said the discussion got a little heated but the protesters tried to listen to the teens and talk to them.

When the group left, one youth came up to her.

"He told me, 'We might not agree with you, but we're leaving here learning something.' That makes me feel we're really doing something."

Demonstrating for world peace isn't exactly a financially rewarding endeavor, said Beck, a part-time college instructor and full-time peace activist.

Many demonstrators who spend most of their days at the protest site receive food, clothing and shelter through private donations to the Nuremberg Actions Committee.

Some, such as 18-year-old Spaulding Brook, work by day and put in as much time as they can protesting at night or on weekends. A carpenter, Brook also built bunk beds for the Peace House.

"There's a place for everyone here and everyone's talents," he said.

"I'm very committed to changing our government's policy in Central America," he said. "I see this house as a way to do that."

Sanderson Beck, one of four permanent residents at the Peace House, said protesting can be emotionally invigorating as well as