

Pursuit of Social Justice

Minister and veteran has spent many years advocating for peace

By Jeanie Senior

The Rev. David Duncombe of White Salmon hasn't just watched history happen around him.

The retired medical school chaplain and United Church of Christ minister took part in many of the events that have shaped the past several decades.

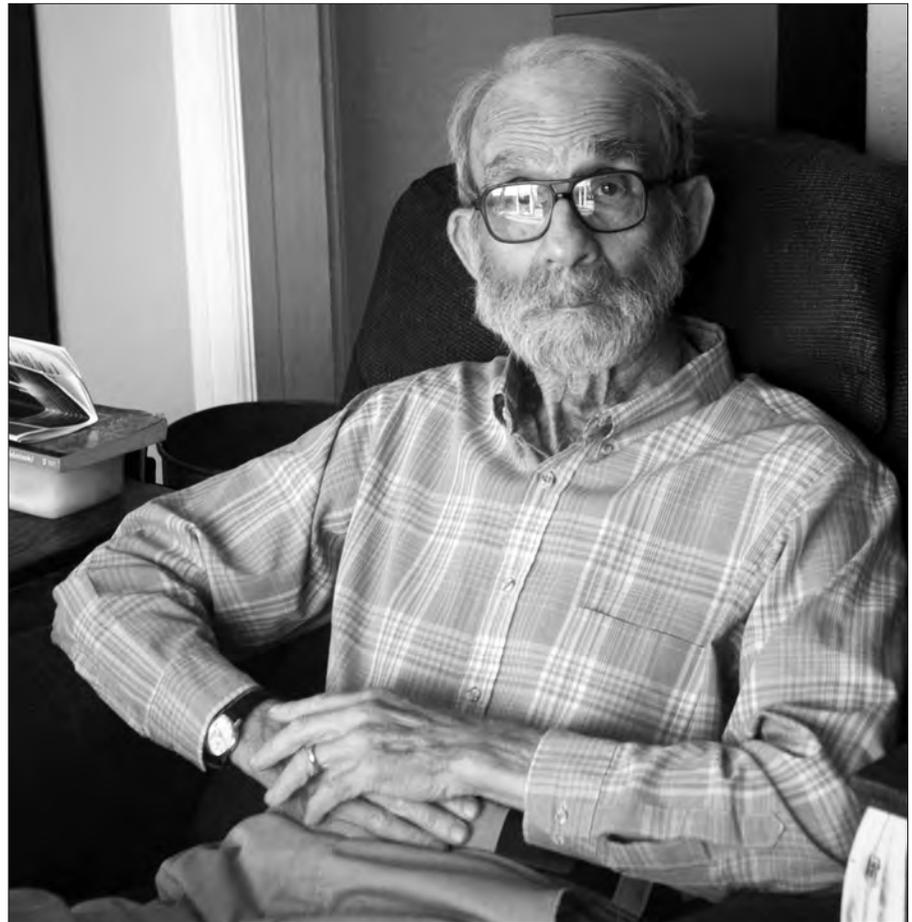
David served with the U.S. Army at the end of World War II and in the Korean War, registered African-American voters in the South in the early 1960s and marched for civil rights with Martin Luther King Jr.

An activist who is nationally known for his work for peace and his efforts against poverty and hunger, David was involved in efforts to stop the shipment of weapons to Central America from the Concord Naval Weapons Station in the San Francisco Bay area, getting arrested about a hundred times during six years.

In 1987, David was one of three Veterans for Peace attempting to stop a munitions train at Concord when it sped up unexpectedly. He and another vet jumped out of its way, but the train struck former Air Force Capt. Brian Willson, who lost both legs and nearly died. The event spurred a protest that lasted for many days and involved thousands of people.

"For the next six years, I was out there at least one day a week," David says. "My job was to teach people how to block trains and trucks. I got pretty good at that. We all started going to jail!"

Furious about what happened to Willson, David went on what was to be



The Rev. David Duncombe was medical school chaplain at Yale and the University of California.

his first 40-day fast.

"I was so angry that I went through that fast without once getting hungry, living on anger and shock," he says.

He did a 40-day fast in the Contra Costa County jail, where he was touched by the compassion his fellow prisoners showed as he got progressively weaker.

The county jail "is fairly nice and I certainly had no trouble with the jailers," David says. "They were on their best behavior, but jail is jail and I caught tuberculosis in jail and I'm paying the price for it. I've only got about 30 percent of my lungs left. The TB is not active but

it's sort of eating away at my lungs."

David, 81, and his late wife, Sally, both raised in the East, moved to White Salmon in 1993 after he retired as chaplain of the medical school at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF).

"We were looking for a little town where we could walk to the grocery and the library and things like that, and I wouldn't be getting into all kinds of trouble with the police and so forth," he jokes. "I've managed to do that, pretty much.

On three occasions, from 2000 to

2007, David went to Washington, D.C., to lobby for debt relief for impoverished nations. Each time, he's fasted for at least 40 days, drinking only water, to dramatize the need.

A member of Bread for the World, a national lobbying organization that works to solve hunger, he says he was moved to action when he came across a statistic that said 19,000 sub-Saharan children starved to death each day.

Pondering how best to help, he says, "I knew I could fast, I had the experience."

He went to Washington, where a couple of members of Congress told him it would be more effective for him, as clergy, if he visited Congressional offices while fasting. The gesture would symbolize the starvation that goes in impoverished nations. Starving people don't have access to congressmen, but you do, he was told

"That appealed to me," David says. "I knew that I could function physically while fasting."

In 2007, when David fasted for 46 days, the debt relief bill finally passed.

David is a graduate of Dartmouth College. He studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York, attracted there by Christian intellectual Reinhold Neibuhr, then did a stint as chaplain at Taft School in Connecticut. Already ordained to the ministry, David earned a doctorate at Yale's divinity school.

He subsequently was hired as Yale Medical School's first chaplain.

David enrolled as a first-year medical student "just so I could get the feel of it, get the vocabulary," he says.

He found the anatomy lab was an ideal place for a chaplaincy, because people were not fixed in their attention on a lecturer or a microscope.

"They were standing around a table with a cadaver on it," he says. "They were doing things with their hands. They weren't thinking a whole lot. It was a little like knitting, you can talk while you're knitting."

At the end of the school year, David



David reminisces about his life as he wanders the property of his 95-year-old White Salmon home.

conducted a memorial service for the cadavers.

"You wouldn't think it would be something that would attract medical students but it did," he says. "It's a funny thing, when you are with a cadaver. There's kind of an emotional attachment. You can't just walk out of the lab on the last day."

At the service, students would talk about their relationship, sing hymns and reference their religious tradition if they had one.

Yale asked David to continue working with anatomy students.

"They were interested in having somebody who knew anatomy, could talk about ethical things informally, spot students who were having emotional difficulties," he says.

It was a practice he continued for 25 years, later at the UCSF medical school.

Sally, who he calls "a great explorer," died in 2005, but her presence lingers in their 95-year-old White Salmon house, which David says looks a bit like her family home in upper Vermont.

Their three grown children "have turned out pretty well," David says.

Daughter Jane Duncombe, a landscape architect, is general manager of Columbia

Art Gallery in Hood River; Betsy is a clinical social worker in Maine, who teaches yoga and meditation in jails; son Stephen, a tenured professor at New York University, has published five books and just returned from teaching at Moscow University on a Fulbright scholarship.

David continues to work for social justice. He is a member of the board of the Washington Gorge Action Program and works with the Columbia River Fellowship for Peace. His "regular job" is working as a handyman for the Guided Path emergency shelter and several transitional housing units.

"I'm down there a number of times a week fixing things," he says. "I grew up on a farm where you had to know how to fix things. That sort of comes natural to me."

He still preaches from time to time, at Bethel Congregational Church, the White Salmon United Methodist church and St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Hood River.

Schools and other organizations often ask David to speak about the civil rights struggle or anti-war movement.

"I try to honor that as much as I can."

Despite lung difficulty slowing him down, David says, "I like to keep as active as I can." ■