

# Alicia Littletree

*Protégé of Judi Beri*



*Alicia Littletree Bales in 2005 with Jude her one-year-old son doing a live interview at KMEC. "It was really hard trying to balance being a new Mom and and being an activist."*

## *The Education of a Rebel Spirit*

Interviewed in 2007 by  
**King Collins and Gabrielle Welford**

*For the activist community  
of Northern California, and the members and former members  
of the Mendocino Environmental Center*

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**T**his interview was completed in the summer of 2007. It was part of an effort to create a quality publication for the MEC and the wider community of activists, a publication capable of expressing the activities and discussions going on within and around the organization. The idea for the project came out of conversations among Dennis O'Brien, Gabrielle Welford and King Collins.

**Regarding the Interview:**

Alicia Littletree was a youthful participant in the North Coast timber wars and became a close friend and working associate of Judi Beri. She spent many hours with Beri working tirelessly at the MEC headquarters in Ukiah.

Environmentalists and activists of all kinds—even activists for causes we may hate—will quicken to the words of Alicia

Littletree. “There’s something empowering about pulling something off” she says. “It changes you.” She could easily have gone to college and had a Ph.D. by now. Or she could have hung out with Earth First! for a while and gone ahead with a career. Instead she became a protégé of Judi Bari, and grew up in the intellectual and cultural milieu of anti-war and environmental activism and critical thinking. Her thoughts contain organizational wisdom learned in the actual practice of direct action over an extended period of time. Whether as organization or activist, we can take advantage of her experience in brass tacks organizing to rekindle the spirit of activism at the MEC.

We like Alicia for many reasons but especially because she reminds us of what the MEC once was.

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*Gabrielle Welford and King Collins at the MEC in 2006. Gabrielle died April 24, 2011.*

# Alicia Littletree

## *The Education of a Rebel Spirit*

By King Collins and Gabrielle Welford

*Alicia Littletree Bales is known in her community as an environmental activist, Earth First! troubadour and for her work as a radio journalist (KZYY “Truth To Power”). She was only 17 years old when she joined Earth First! in 1991. That was after the car bombing that disabled Judi Bari. Alicia became Bari’s closest associate, working on a wide variety of Earth First! projects. She was the youngest member of the legal team that worked for 12 difficult years and eventually won a lawsuit against the FBI and Oakland Police. She also served on the board of the MEC in the turbulent times after Betty and Gary Ball left the organization. Now she’s in her early 30s and has a three-year-old son named Jude. In this candid interview she shares her ideas about the MEC and how to build a movement.*



*Alicia Littletree Bales and son, Jude, at the Mendocino College Award Ceremony*

**I'm here with Alicia Bales who is also known as Alicia Littletree. Do you still use that name?**

I still do. Littletree was my CB (radio) handle during the Albion Uprising. In 1992, Louisiana Pacific Timber went to log in an area beloved by the Albion community.

There's a place on the Albion Estuary called the Enchanted Meadow. There's forest all around it. Across the river is Table Mountain, which is an old community. LP went in to log---that was 15 years ago---and there was a big uprising, the Albion Uprising. We blockaded LP every single day of the logging operation.

**How long did the Albion Uprising last?**

The direct action blockades against the logging happened non-stop for nine weeks. It started right around the time of the

1992 earthquake and the Rodney King ruling. So there was a sustained logging blockade and many, many tree sits, 16 in all. We kind of pulled off a treetop occupation, which was really amazing.

So Littletree was my CB name when I was one of the tree sitters.

**The MEC was founded in 1986. Were you around here then?**

I was 12 years old in 1986. I was living in Sacramento with my mother. I didn't come to Northern California until I was 17, just out of high school.

**So you went to high school in Sacramento. Tell us about that.**

It was a very affluent high school--not that I was. I felt very out of place, but I was there because of the academic track I was into. Anyway I was doing some environmental organizing: I started an environmental club and that sort of thing. When the Gulf war started I was really, really disillusioned by it, and so I joined up with this political activist group in Sacramento, and we set up an affinity group and we did a lot of organizing around the war. That was when I was sixteen, and that was the first activism I did.

The group was called the "Ad-hoc Committee For Peace," and it was a bunch of young anarchists with a great sense of humor and a direct-action ethic. We did some really great organizing around the gulf war in Sacramento. We had fun

In high school I joined up with this political activist group in Sacramento....a bunch of young anarchists with a great sense of humor and a direct-action ethic.

protests, like the "war is uncouth" march and fashion show through the richest part of town. But we also did blockades and civil disobedience, and that's how I first was arrested for occupying the busiest intersection in

Sacramento during rush hour on the day after the bombing began.

I'll never forget it. There is something empowering about pulling something off. Really doing it. It changes you.

**You weren't at the first Redwood Summer in Humboldt County, then. How did you get involved there?**

After the war "ended," our group in Sacramento was looking for something

more to be involved with, and Earth First! was really in synch with our activism. Some of our group had been to Redwood Summer, and EF! was calling for "Redwood Summer II" in 1992. We went as an affinity group, about fifteen of us.

I was totally ignorant of what was happening in the EF! leadership at the time. I had no idea. I was just having crushes on the cute boy activists and swimming in the river. Later, I learned from Judi, though, that Redwood Summer II had been important, because it was their first campaign since the first Redwood Summer, and kind of proof that the bombing of Judi and Darryl had not destroyed them.

But there were some real problems within EF! As a result of the bombing and the aftermath, people were really terrified. The organizing had become centralized, decision-making was not collective, and information was held secret. As a result, the backwoods actions during Redwood Summer II, or Ecotopia Summer, were a disaster, and the group really had to work through some serious self-criticism.

After that fiasco in the forest, we regrouped and decided to do an action back in Sacramento. I participated in an action at the state capitol where a banner was hung for headwaters forest and two men locked down to the statue of Columbus in

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*Activist occupying a spot high in a tree at the "Albion Uprising," where Alicia Littletree met Judi Bari for the first time.*

the foyer of the Capitol building. I was arrested for my part and sent to Juvi for that.

My mother was not happy. She said, "I am so not into what you are doing!"

### **How did you get so close to Judi Bari?**

I started working for her on her lawsuit against the FBI. Judi had a strong ethic for paying activists when possible to do work.

She needed someone to drive for her and I went with her on a lot of trips to the city.

We spent a lot of time together. I got educated just being with her. She gave me thousands of articles to read and sort through. That's how I learned the case. Later when she was dying, she gave her files to me. I'm sure she was confident that I was the right one to have the files. We sat around and talked about this stuff for hours and hours. Now I'm aware that you can win but also how difficult it is to do that and how much it takes of yourself.

**Let's talk about the MEC. For the first 10 years Betty and Gary Ball were the leaders, the mainstays. You were a board member after they left for Colorado. Some say that we should find another Betty and Gary. What do you think?**

The thing is not to replicate Betty and Gary but to *understand what they did*. Some things were unique to their personalities. While the fighting raged and people weren't talking to each other, Betty managed to be able to talk to everyone. I don't know how she did that. Maybe by the sheer force of her sweetness. She was articulate and smart and not a kiss-up at all.

Gary wasn't on the phone so much. He kept our mailing list and he was extremely reliable for that. We would hand him new names and changes and he would input them. That was huge for us. He was so dependable and reliable. After he left I actually paid people to do that.

Betty and Gary had respect for ANY level of activism. If you were willing to do anything it was okay with them. So all the activists felt like they had a home there. They were never exclusive. K-Mart and WalMart developments, Native American support, environmentalism, obviously. Everything was welcome. I first got to know the MEC because the MEC was EarthFirst!'s address.

I remember when we were in Humboldt, EF! opened a little office and I basically sat behind the phone for a month, and that made a big difference. I could see

that just having a stable person, someone who is always there, was really important.

So I don't think that anyone can replace Betty and Gary. People used to say to me: "You can't be Judi Bari." Well, excuse me! I wasn't trying to be Judi Bari. I knew I couldn't be her. But I know what she did and I'm going to do those things because that's what works.

It's the same thing with the MEC. If everything revolves around an individual, that's a problem. Judi was aware of it. She even said that: "Every time I've left the struggle it has gone away." The Headwaters struggle didn't exactly go away. There were protests and Julia Butterfly's amazing tree sit, which was a kind of distraction, in a way.

**So, are you saying that Julia Butterfly was not a good leader?**

It wasn't a secret that I was critical of what was going on with Julia's tree sit. It was nothing personal. Julia was charismatic and a great speaker, and she inspired a lot

of people. She was also incredibly determined and committed to the tree sit. My difficulty with it had to do with strategy and goals. All the years I organized with Earth First! were about mobilizing many people to work together, creating mass civil disobedience and direct action. Earth first! had a tradition of collective decision-



Judi Bari, 1949 -1997

People were terrified after Judi was bombed. The organizing had become centralized, and information was held secret. As a result, the backwoods actions of Redwood Summer II were a disaster, and Earth First! had to work through some serious self-criticism.

making that was absent in Julia's working group, which basically centered around her and what she wanted to do. EF! was never about one person or one action, we just came back, week after week, season after season. I felt it was very powerful, profoundly, on a community level. I don't think much social change can be accomplished by individuals or individual actions.

I was also uncomfortable with the celebrity culture that sprouted up around Julia, because I feel it is disempowering. I'm not saying EF! was perfect by any means. I found it very difficult to discuss these differences at the time, though. People seemed horrified by anything but hallowed words about Julia Butterfly, which I also found disturbing.

### **How did you raise money in Earth First!?**

Money came from direct mail. We brought in a lot of money. We put out a couple of mailings a year and people responded.

But the thing is, we were constantly organizing, putting our phone number out, having face-to-face meetings with people, calling base camps. I went on several road shows myself. Judi would go on speaking engagements. Daryl would play all over the state. We were out there. There were benefits locally and we would always have a mailing list sign up. That's important.

We were constantly organizing, putting our phone number out, having face-to-face meetings....We would always have a mailing list sign up.

We were about action, not just talking about it, we were always **doing** it.

Sometimes it was just a piece of paper, but I made a form---I learned this from Judi--that we called an "Action Pledge." It had your name and address and a list of things you were willing to do. One of them was always "Send money." I would have these

forms at my table or  
enclose it in a mailing.

But we were about action. We were not just talking about it, we were always *doing* it. So in that way we had an advantage. Our business was mobilizing people. We had separate lists for meetings. There was a local list. We called

regular meetings. We always sent out meeting notices so people would be aware that meetings were happening. That's crucial. When someone hears of a meeting they were not told about, it undermines the willingness to be involved. We were very consistent about meeting notices, and frequency of meetings.

After Betty and Gary left, the whole EF! list fell to me. It was never more than 2500 people. And there's a process of maintaining a mail list. We would

drop people from the fund raising list if they did not respond for a long time. We never cut someone who came to actions, though,

because those were the ones we most wanted.

It would cost thousands of dollars to put out a mailing but we would always get several times that back.

And you know Judi found out that



when she went to colleges and gave speeches, the college students would sign up but they always fell off. They almost never participated and never sent money. So she just stopped going to colleges.

**Interesting. I guess college students are not like they were in the 60s. So where did your supporters come from?**

They came from events. From mobilizations, meetings, tables. When I did my road shows, I got a lot of names that way. People would constantly call up the MEC and we would take their names. When I did my radio show (Truth To Power), people would call. This was all pre-internet. I'll bet now people would send email or fill out an on-line form.

**But now there's no Redwood Summer.**

There was no Redwood Summer when Judi and her friends started either. They had an idea how to mobilize. You asked about the mailings and what made them work. Well, I think the most powerful thing about the EF mailings was the distillation of the political reality and why you, the reader, needed to get involved to make a difference. And we didn't just make that up. We did it. We were a direct action group. Our purpose was to get out there and commit civil

disobedience. Our analysis was about why direct action was necessary. That's what it comes down to. In your mailing, or pamphlet or whatever, you have to make it clear why this has to be done. It is really motivating to think, "I need to do this.

Somebody has figured out what needs to be done, and I can join with them and do it."

But if you are saying that everything is rotten and send us some money, the reader thinks, "Hey I'm paying for their organizational costs," and who wants to do that?



*Alicia with one-year-old Jude doing a live interview at KMEC. "It was really hard trying to balance being a new Mom and and being an activist."*

**Well, suppose the Board of Directors offered you the job of running the MEC. What would be your approach?**

Well. I would start. I would raise the profile of the station. Do the Betty thing: Contact people, reach out to the different communities in the area. And find out from the programming what they think and what they want.

My original idea for a KMEC mailing was not to ask for money, but just say, "Give us your name and address." You know: build the mail list and ask for money later.

But right now the MEC list is only 200 names, not much of a list.

**Why did you drop out of the MEC?**

It was really hard to balance being a new Mom and being an activist. I had so

My dream [for KMEC] was to have a block of consistent Spanish programming in the afternoon and evening.

many ideas for programming and running the station. I just felt like I couldn't make anything happen. The last thing I did was to call a programmers' meeting to talk about having some kind of training program, collectivizing programming decisions, reaching out to communities that are under-served,

but it seemed like all that was sidetracked and the big issue was that the teenagers were playing rap songs with bad words in them. So I did a whole show on balancing free speech against the rules of the FCC. But the process was not working for me, so I dropped out.

Oh, and nobody was listening. That's the other thing. It was like talking into a bucket. The station had no visibility. So it wasn't worth it to me to be breaking myself, sacrificing my family. For what?

**I think other people dropped out for similar reasons. Like Joe Louis (Wildman).**

I asked him to get involved. I wanted him to do a weekly analysis of what is going on in local government politics. I think he is a good local voice for that.

**So would you like to see the community programming be more coherent?**

Yes, of course. But people need support for that; they need skill building; they need to know that somebody is listening and giving positive feedback about it, and

the station should be trying to get them an audience.

Like I said, if I was "the leader of the MEC Roommm! Roommm!" (motorcycle sounds) I would make sure that the programming was relevant and that people knew about it.

Our culture is at a strange place where collective values are really absent....

We don't even have basic collective and communal skills that are part of movement building

We can have more programs about solar power and localization and on and on. But I'm used to like, "Where are we going to go and what are we going to do?" I want to see something real. There are a lot of people in this community doing things, but you have to build from the ground and figure out, literally,

step by step, how to build those networks and connect people and get information out there.

**So would you be on the phone to people asking if they wanted to do a show or what?**

Yes. My dream at the time was to have a block of consistent Spanish programming in the afternoon and evening on KMEC. If I didn't have to go through a process and convince anyone, I would talk with some community leaders in the Latino community in Ukiah, and I would get some Spanish language talk programming going, consistently at the same time. Not one hour but four or five hours from like 4 to 9 pm. Because most of them live in town. There's not a lot of Latinos living in the hills. And there is NOT a Spanish

language political talk program in the valley as far as I know.

And as I said before, I'd see what was going on and contact every group that is doing anything around the county. Basic networking.

**Well, that sounds like a great idea.**

But talk radio has to have a solid and reliable foundation that supports people, because good programming takes a lot of energy and knowhow--you have to learn how to do a show, how to think about it, and what makes good radio. You've got to have consistency and an audience. Anyway, that's where I would start, to try and bring the Latino community in. We have a radio station: Who needs it most?

**We have a new board now. Maybe we could have a get together to discuss how the MEC could connect with you and others who may feel the same way.**

Well, maybe so. Remember how there used to be a core of hippie activists who hardly had any money? They were dirty and ratty but would always show up. But then again, what's there to show up for? If we're not building for something, I don't want to do it.

**Well, you say you don't feel like getting involved in anything that's going on right now. So. . .**

I think there's a huge crisis of leadership. It seems like the people in leadership positions right now are just so individualistic. There's so much "I'm great: I'm in leadership" sort of thing. It's not about that at all! And leadership is crucial to movement building.

**Tell us more about that...**

Well, if you look at Betty and Gary and Judi, they were incredible leaders. People depended on them. It's a psychological thing that happens in groups, and as a young woman I caught some shit when I was in a leadership position. People weren't comfortable with that. But I found that people need to have someone they can depend on, somebody they feel knows what is going on. And I tried to give them the confidence to act.

And the reality is that someone has to take the responsibility for doing all the little jobs. There has to be someone with a sense of what is going on. Receiving the mail, opening it, digesting it. I don't see that kind of leadership happening around here. I have some friends in

the Bay Area that I respect in that kind of leadership.

I used to talk about this kind of stuff all the time, but there aren't a lot of people who've had the experience I've had. I feel kind of isolated sometimes. There aren't many people I can talk to about this kind of thing.

I have this recurring fantasy of starting a work group to look at how you do the basic stuff:

How do you do outreach?  
How do you have a meeting?  
How do you work together?

Because people are just clueless about those things.

**Well suppose the MEC was more pliable...**

Well, maybe, but for me it would have to start with really basic things like people getting together and talking about what to do.

**What effect has your past direct action organizing had on what you are doing now?**

Well, right now I am in a kind of confused and stagnant place politically. Kind of in a backlash. I just need to come to terms with my culture and find out as much as I can about what people in the mainstream are thinking. I just need to have something to compare. I'm an extremely critical thinker and my leftist politics are up for criticism as much as anything else. If I'm going to be politically active again, and I'm sure I will be, I want to come up with something really useful, something that I could be proud of, and not just do something to feel good about myself. I don't have any energy for that right now. I've got to be efficient with my energy. But I have no idea what that will be.

I'm glad people are out there doing things

But I also think our culture is at a very strange place where collective values are really absent at the moment. The pendulum swing is totally toward individualism. That was what was up-and-coming in the 80s, and now we're at the apex of individualism. We don't even know how to work

It would have to start with really basic things like people getting together and talking about what to do.

together and don't have any idea about basic collective and communal skills that are part of movement building. Those skills are forgotten, and even the instinct for it.

In the 60s and 70s there was kind of a cultural basis for collectivism. Maybe it was because computers hadn't centralized

so much information. We just had to be kind of organized and reach out to people. Now everybody sits in front of their computer in their own little

bubble and I don't see people really doing things together.

Well, maybe I'm not seeing it, but my feeling is that we have to start from scratch. I have this recurring fantasy of starting a work group to look at how you do the basic stuff: How do you do outreach? How do you have a meeting? How do you work together? Because people are just clueless about those things. Not that I'm so smart but I do have this memory of this experience where I've actually done it. Thousands of actions, civil disobedience and arrests and people working together and doing their best.

Like I said before, there's something satisfying about pulling something off, you know. Really doing it. It changes you.

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*Alicia Littletree can be reached by email (littletree@pacific.net). She is the founder of Little Tree Organics, a market garden.*







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—*Alicia Littletree Bales*

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of Dale Glaser  
and Gabrielle Welford*

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