

For more than a year, Sister Megan Rice, 85, a Roman Catholic nun of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, had caught occasional glimpses of the glittering World Trade Center from her living quarters: the Metropolitan Detention Center, a federal prison on the Brooklyn waterfront.

So when the Volvo she was riding in one morning last week crested the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and the skyscraper came into full view, it made a strong impression.

“Oh, my gosh,” Sister Rice exclaimed. Drinking in the scenery and the panorama of New York Harbor, she added, “We’re well on our way.”

It was her fifth day of freedom after two years behind bars for a crime for which she is boldly unapologetic. In 2012, she joined two other peace activists in splattering blood and antiwar slogans on a nuclear plant in Tennessee that holds enough highly enriched uranium to make thousands of nuclear warheads. All three were convicted and sent to prison. But on May 8, an appellate court ruled that the government had overreached in charging them with sabotage, and ordered them set free.

Photo



Sister Rice and two other activists broke into the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tenn., which holds highly enriched uranium. The government charged them with sabotage after they splattered the building with blood and antiwar slogans. Credit U.S. Government, via Getty Images

Since her release on May 16, Sister Rice, a Manhattan native, had been reconnecting with family and friends, as well as seeing doctors, lawyers and reporters. She took time to visit St. Patrick’s Cathedral, and she made her first purchase: peanut butter frozen yogurt topped with hot fudge.

Now, dressed in a sweatsuit that fellow inmates had given her, the nun was traveling to the

American headquarters of her order in Rosemont, Pa., a suburb of Philadelphia. The agenda was to confer with her superiors about her future — one in which she plans to continue her antinuclear activism. One threat was that the federal government might challenge the recent ruling and try to have her thrown back in prison.

“It would be an honor,” Sister Rice said during the ride. “Good Lord, what would be better than to die in prison for the antinuclear cause?”

Her family and friends seemed slightly agog at her fiery commitment and rabble-rousing energy after so much time in jail.

“It’s unbelievable,” said a cousin with whom the nun is staying, who asked that her name be withheld to avoid unwanted attention. “I would be semicomatose.”

At the wheel of the Volvo on the drive to Rosemont was Roberta Pyzel, a New York filmmaker, who joked and bantered with her friend Sister Rice and a reporter, at one point extolling the merits of road food. She urged the nun to expand her palate: “You can’t live on peanut butter yogurt for the rest of your life.”

Sister Rice, thin but seemingly healthy, was in high spirits and voluble as she talked about her religious order, her atomic radicalization, her life in prison and what may come next.

Even before she broke into the [Y-12 National Security Complex](#) in Oak Ridge, Tenn., Sister Rice had been arrested dozens of times for acts of civil disobedience. She and other peace activists once blocked a truck rumbling across a nuclear test site in the Nevada desert. Twice, she served six-month jail sentences.

The pacifists belong to the [Plowshares](#) movement, a loose, mostly Christian group that seeks the global elimination of nuclear arms.

The Tennessee action took place on a Saturday night in July 2012. Sister Rice, then 82, Michael Walli, 63, and Gregory Boertje-Obed, 57, cut through barbed-wire fences at the Oak Ridge complex. Making their way to the inner sanctum, full of uranium, they splashed human blood on the windowless building, spray-painted its walls with peace slogans, hammered at its concrete base and draped it in crime-scene tape.

After being convicted in May 2013, Sister Rice was sentenced to three years and the two men to five years. She was imprisoned in Tennessee, then Georgia, and in March 2014 was sent to Brooklyn, just off the Gowanus Expressway.

The nun told how a single large room at the Brooklyn prison had housed more than 100 women. Early this year, [The Daily News](#) published an article calling the prison a “hellhole.” After that, some inmates were moved. “The language bothered me,” Sister Rice recalled. “But people wouldn’t have listened otherwise.”

She said a gifted legal team, working pro bono, had seemingly materialized out of thin air to fight the government’s sabotage charge. The court’s overturning of the antinuclear conviction this month was hailed as a legal first.

“This action was meant to be,” Sister Rice said of the Tennessee protest. “Things fell into place — unplanned. That’s the unbelievable part of it.”

She said she had lost her access to email at the prison and learned the specifics of her release not from her lawyers or her family, but from a BBC News radio broadcast at 3 in the morning. Disbelieving, she listened again at 4 a.m.

“I started packing,” she recalled, “just in case it was true.”

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