

Profile: Jane Swanson, Anti-Nuclear Activist and Sierra Club Partner

By Jill Stegman



Jane Swanson turned eighty this year. Most of us know her from her association with San Luis Obispo Mothers for Peace (MFP), a firebrand group that was first formed in 1967 to protest the Vietnam War, and later reformed in 1973 to oppose Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant. Glancing at the timeline on the [Mothers for Peace website](#), we see that the Sierra Club has also been active against Diablo from the plan's conception in 1963, and has often been a partner with MFP in protesting it.

Jane is now the president and spokesperson of MFP. For over fifty years, she has been speaking, writing and attending hearings against Diablo Canyon. Google her to find links to YouTube videos, interviews, documentaries and essays. Following her is [a journey back in time](#) with relevance for the future.

Jane has been responsible for keeping the flame lit in her advocacy to fight the dangers and risks of Diablo Canyon and of nuclear energy in general. When I spoke to Jane, I expected to hear how she had been fighting the establishment from infancy, but her story does not follow that trajectory. Born to two teachers who were quiet activists in local protests, but not loudly defiant, Jane spent the first eight or so years of her life sitting on the couch sucking her thumb as a very shy child and diffident student. It wasn't until she was eight that she, inspired by a friend, decided that it might be fun to chase boys.

From there she started to show the grit and mettle that would motivate her to tackle the powerful forces behind Diablo Canyon and the nuclear power industry. She began excelling in school and won academic awards and accolades that led to acceptance at the prestigious Pomona College, in Claremont, California, where she met her future husband, Clifton.

Maybe Jane's first protest was when she and Clif conspired to keep him out of the Vietnam War by having a baby. Impending fatherhood gave him a deferment from serving in a war the couple opposed. In 1969, after moving to San Luis Obispo, where Clif took a position at Cal Poly teaching music, Jane joined Mothers for Peace, which was active in protesting the Vietnam War.

As the war was winding down, MFP and the Sierra Club were alerted to the dangers of a nuclear power plant being built on the coastline near Avila Beach and were conversing about intervening in Diablo's licensing process. In 1973, MFP filed as Intervenors against the licensing of the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant. They produced evidence that the Hosgri Fault, an earthquake fault located off the coast from the plant site, had not been disclosed when PG&E applied for the permit to construct the plant.

MFP simultaneously took a position for conservation and solar energy, aligned with the Sierra Club's stand. That could be considered the first partnership between the Sierra Club and MFP. Member Linda Seeley was influential in education about the dangers of Diablo. Since then, together and separately, MFP and the Sierra Club have unequivocally opposed nuclear energy and the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Here are some other connections between MFP and the Sierra Club going back through the years.

1987: PG&E asked the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) for a one-year extension to complete The Long-Term Seismic Study that was a condition of the operating license for Diablo Canyon. MFP and the Sierra Club objected and requested a public hearing. On May 6, 1988, PG&E announced that it would complete the required seismic study by the original due date of July 31, 1988.

2003: MFP and the Sierra Club filed suit in the 9th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals to compel the NRC to address the vulnerability of Diablo Canyon to a terrorist attack before approving PG&E's plan for the expanded storage of nuclear waste on site. Three years later, [the court agreed](#).

2006: MFP, the Sierra Club, and two Coastal Commissioners appealed the SLO County Board of Supervisors' approval of the Diablo Canyon steam generator replacement project to the California Coastal Commission.

Dec 17, 2017: MFP and the Sierra Club collaborated on an appeal to obtain unredacted copies of emails to determine whether PG&E and the NRC had worked together to counteract widespread news coverage about seismic dangers at Diablo Canyon.

Looking back over the past fifty years, MFP has faced a continuous battle to checkmate PG&E and the power it holds over regulatory commissions. There have been moments of euphoria juxtaposed with despair, such as anticipating the closure of Diablo in 2025, and then learning of Governor Newsom's support for relicensing the plant.

I asked Jane what kept her motivated when so many MFP appeals have been denied. She replied without hesitation, "I couldn't have done it in isolation. It was the ties and connections with people – attorneys, immediate close friends and our Mothers for Peace board members that kept me engaged."

Jane said that the core group tends to stay involved with activism until they literally cannot speak or hold a pen in their hand. The group is aging, the timeline notes several deaths and memorial services along the fifty years including that of one original member Liz Apfelberg. Just last February, long-time and cherished MFP Board Member Elaine Holder died at the age of 97. She was managing the timeline until her fingers were literally frozen stiff with arthritis.