Q: If you can, give us a brief history of American Friends Service Committee: where it came from, and what it’s doing now.

A: The American Friends Service Committee started in 1917 as a group that came together to support conscientious objectors to World War I. After the war was over, decided to continue as an organization working not only on peace issues but other social justice issues, from labor rights to women’s rights and racial equality. Today we’re mainly known as a peace organization. We’ve been organizing against the Iraq War and against the present occupation in Iraq. We have programs in the Middle East, and in fact we have Quaker International Affairs representatives all over the world in hot spots from Columbia to Israel/Palestine, Iraq. And we are one of the few faith-based organizations, probably the only one, allowed into North Korea to talk with folks there. We have domestic offices about 45 all around the country working on immigration and peace issues.

Q: The reason why we’re interested in your story is because of the FOIA lawsuit you recently filed. Can you give us background on what that is, with whom you filed it, and why?

A: With the FOIA lawsuit we worked with the American Civil Liberties Union and many other faith-based and civil rights groups here in Chicago. And I believe it’s a national effort as well, to find out what the FBI knows about First Amendment groups that are speaking out, most notably against the war in Iraq, but not confined to that. And we’re trying to find out what relationship there is between the Chicago police, if any, and the Joint Terrorism Task Forces that the FBI has set up. There’s quite a bit of evidence to say that the local police are working with these FBI Task Forces. We had some particular cases here in Chicago back in the 50’s, 60’s, and 70’s, what was known as the Chicago Police Red Squad was notorious for their surveillance of basic First Amendment activities, anti-Vietnam War protests, civil rights activities. I know I was photographed personally by some of these Red Squad members when I handed out leaflets for the United Farm Workers. They’d come up into your face and just take your picture. It was part intimidation and part information gathering. There were also cameras set up on top of the post office so that they could take pictures of rallies in Federal Plaza. And at the American Friends Service Committee there was a bug, a microphonic bug found under the conference table. And there were a number of groups that filed suit and the ACLU was our attorney against the Red Squad. And we won the suit eventually, and there was a Shackman Decree, it was called in Chicago that kept the police from doing surveillance against First Amendment groups.

That all changed right after 9/11. And Mayor Daley and the police went to a judge and got, basically, most of those restraints taken away. So that what we’ve seen in the last couple years is very similar to the old Red Squad activities. The American Friends Service Committee, among four other groups, were under surveillance according to the police’s own audit that they did two years ago when the TransAtlantic Business Dialogue was meeting here and AFSC and a number of groups were planning a march and demonstration based on issues around fair trade versus free trade. Anyway, this was – we were negotiating with police about a route and were very open about what we were doing, but in this audit they came out with the fact that there had been an undercover agent involved in
the planning meetings and perhaps even fundraising meetings of some of the groups. And we have requested from the Chicago police information – what they have. And in the audit itself they said there’s a whole boxful of CD-ROMs, videotapes, mini-DVDs of we don’t know what. Was it meetings? Was it individual people? Was it the march? And we want to know. And we also want to know what they gave to the FBI, if anything.

Q: Were there any anecdotes that people in your organization pointed to and said, “We feel that we’re being monitored in this particular instance,” and then the audit results confirmed that? Or was it the audit that drove your awareness of this?

A: Well, because the AFSC is really a very open organization and we tend to work with most anyone who believes in non-violence, there was no suspicion that anybody had infiltrated the organization. And we certainly invite everyone to come in and we don’t want to become a closed organization at any point. So that’s what was mysterious because most of what we do is open and above board and why would anyone want to infiltrate us? And in fact our concern is, you know, if the Quakers are being – are under surveillance, maybe there’s no one who’s safe at this point.

Q: We had also been talking about surveillance going on during the 80s in regard to the Sanctuary Movement and CISPES. Do you have any anecdotes from that time?

A: Well, in the 1980’s I did work with the public Sanctuary Movement, and here in Chicago we were sort of a clearing house of information nationally of what was happening. And not only was the American Friends Service Committee’s offices where we were housed broken into very suspiciously - nothing really of value was taken - it was just kind of one of those strange break-ins, it was very similar to others around the country. Churches were being broken into. It was another part of the COINTELPRO operation as far as we could tell. And some of the historic excesses of the FBI back in the 50’s, there were, under the threat of communism, there were a lot of infiltrations. And actually the American Friends Service Committee has a file about this thick [gesturing] about police surveillance in Chicago from the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s. One of the founders of the American Friends Service Committee was actually labeled on one of these documents as a ‘communist sympathizer’. And there were other identifying marks, there were license plate numbers taken down, and people were identified as communists, communist sympathizers, Negroes; and it just shows the level of surveillance that was happening during that period.

Q: What are you hoping to uncover with this lawsuit? Are there specific documents that you’re looking for, or just a general sense of something?

A: Well, we filed the lawsuit for the FOIA originally to find out exactly what the FBI does know and what methods they might be using for surveillance of legitimate First Amendment activities. We think that that’s the right of the people of the United States to know exactly what is being done in their name around the whole issue of countering terrorism. What our fear is, is that terrorism has become the new communism, and that pretty much anything can be justified if you say you’re doing this around terrorism. So we don’t want this period to become a new McCarthyism, which there are signs that it is becoming that way. There’ve been many Muslims in Chicago that get calls from the FBI
and say, “Well, meet me at the Dunkin’ Donuts, I want to talk.” And people are afraid. They don’t know what to do. And this is not the kind of society we want to live in and I don’t think that’s what quote ‘freedom and democracy’ is all about. So we filed, along with many other groups – we want to know the extent, again of the collaboration between the Chicago police and these Joint Terrorism Task Forces. So this is one way to find out.

Q: Looking back at the consent decrees that used to be in force here until they were recently rescinded, what sort of procedural safeguards or separations did they build in? What did they mandate that law enforcement do that is not the case now, in terms of keeping their investigative functions separated out from certain things?

A: Well according to the ACLU, the Chicago police probably have the greatest leeway in terms of investigation of any police force in the country. So that’s one problem. What’s most concerning about this whole audit that they did is the police themselves were saying there are problems. This was not an outside group. So if that’s the case, what would an outside group come in and say? So that’s very concerning to us. And again, what can we learn from what kinds of material they’ve collected from us and other groups?

Q: If you had the chance to make recommendations to law enforcement; to say, “This is really the concept we think you should bear in mind as you try to preserve our security,” what sort of guideposts or parameters would you have them consider as they crafted their policies and initiatives?

A: Well one of the guidelines is certainly that criminal activity is one area where FBI law enforcement has the right, and we intend that they should look into those cases. However, dissent, being against present policy of the United States government, that’s not criminal activity. That is legitimate First Amendment protected rights of freedom of speech and assembly. We also have a case in Chicago as big demonstrations were happening right after the war started, blocks and blocks of police buses were there and the police, not only at the TransAtlantic Business Dialogue demonstration, but also during the initial peace demonstrations after the war started, were out in their full riot gear. It’s very intimidating and it’s a chilling of free speech as far as we’re concerned. They surrounded all of the protestors in Federal Plaza. It was very difficult for people to get in or out. It’s something that as people came up they said, “Well I’m not taking my kids to that.” And then they didn’t come to future demonstrations after that.

So the whole context is really the right of dissent, the right of freedom of speech and assembly, and how all of this activity tends to chill that. We’re also concerned about, now that the American Friends Service Committee name is out there and there are FBI files and so forth; are people afraid to associate with us? And that’s again curtailing people’s right of freedom of assembly and association. These are very dangerous things. The First Amendment rights are very important in this democracy. We’re saying we’re spreading democracy to other countries. Is this the democracy we’re spreading to Iraq and other countries, the kind that where people that are trying to exercise their basic rights of freedom of speech are under surveillance?
Q: Tell me a little bit about some of the other groups that have partnered with you in the FOIA lawsuit, some of the work they do and how they share their intent with you in trying to uncover these documents and this information.

A: Right. Some of the other groups, Fellowship of Reconciliation has been a pacifist group for decades. The groups that have joined in this FOIA lawsuit are Fellowship of Reconciliation, which is a longtime pacifist group, the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, which represents all of the mosques in the greater Chicago area, and is pretty much the chief Muslim organization in the city have joined in. The Civil Rights Group for Muslims has also joined. So there’s a lot of concern, particularly in the Muslim community. And they have experienced specific, what I would call ‘intrusions’ by the FBI into their life, into their mosques, into their faith practices. So they have a particular concern about what the FBI is really trying to find out. Again, these are law abiding citizens. They have joined with us many times in efforts for peace in Iraq. They have been partners with us in interfaith services around peace. And there’s no indication that they have violated any quote ‘criminal or terrorist activity’. They just are exerting their freedom of speech.

Q: When you were talking about the depth of the file, the audit file – we couldn’t see your gesture. I might have you recap the context behind the fact that you had requested.

A: Yes. One of the other reasons we were interested in this FOIA lawsuit was because the American Friends Service Committee does have a history of being under surveillance. We have a file that was researched by the ACLU, it’s about this thick [gesturing] from the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s. In one of the documents, one of the founders of AFSC was called a ‘communist sympathizer’. And there were other labels on people where they were ‘communists’, ‘communist sympathizers’, ‘Negroes’, in these files.

Q: If you’ve spoken to Chicago members of the American Friends Service Committee from back in that era, have they related some of the impact of this surveillance on their lives?

A: Well, no, I can’t say that I did. I mean I have talked to people, I don’t know exactly what – a lot of it was done without their knowledge, so that was also part of it. The good surveillance you don’t know is happening, if it’s really good. So that’s part of the problem as well. If it’s bad surveillance and you know about it at least you’re aware, and you can deal with it. It’s the hidden part, the unknown, that’s sometimes the worst to deal with.

Q: Anything that we’ve missed that you’d like to say?

A: The American Friends Service Committee since its inception has known war. We started objecting to war. Those conscientious objectors went to France to help rebuild the destruction of the First World War. We helped feed German children during the Second World War. We have helped refugees from the wars all over the world. We know war. We despise war. We stand unequivocally against war, and we will continue to voice that. If that is now a crime in the United States of America, then I would say God help us all.