

Students find 'way to help' through Amnesty chapter

By Sean McNamara
Freelance writer

The pen is mightier than the sword in obtaining rights for prisoners of conscience, according to members of Nazareth High School's Amnesty International chapter.

Through letter-writing campaigns, these students, along with thousands of people worldwide, hope to force governments to treat prisoners fairly and to release dissidents jailed for their beliefs.

"I really felt like I needed to do something to help. I was frustrated that I couldn't," explained Christina Kiepper, student coordinator, of her reason for joining Nazareth's chapter. "Amnesty was that way for me to help."

Amnesty International is an apolitical organization that advocates the release of prisoners of conscience (men and women imprisoned for their beliefs), provided they do not advocate violence. Amnesty also calls upon governments to provide fair and prompt trials for all political prisoners, and to end torture and executions in all cases.

The Amnesty chapter at Nazareth was started this fall after students in theology teacher Matt Maruggi's morality class voiced support for the organization. Twenty-seven full members and 15 adjunct members have since joined the chapter, coordinated by Kiepper and five other students: Shannon Joseph, Nuala Hetzler, Lauren Maslanka, Tanya Harding and Amy Pickering.

"I think we felt we needed to do something about the injustice in the world and this (Amnesty International) is the way we could do that," Pickering said.

After discussions in class about Amnesty, students approached Maruggi about starting the chapter. He told them where to get more information, and the students did the rest.

"Students have most of the responsibility. (Chapter advisors) are just there as facilitators," explained Maruggi, who serves in that capacity along with Sister Mary Lee Bishop.

Amnesty's efforts are "very much in keeping with Catholic social teaching," he added. "They advocate the right to being free from the fear that can come from the government."

Amnesty International's student program unites the efforts of students and faculty in more than 600 high schools and colleges across the United States. Student chapters have three main activities: writing urgent action appeals, country campaigns and special actions, and spreading the word on human rights.

Each year, Amnesty also publishes a list of governments which it cites for oppressive activities. Maruggi said many people are surprised to find the United States on the list for having a legalized death penalty.

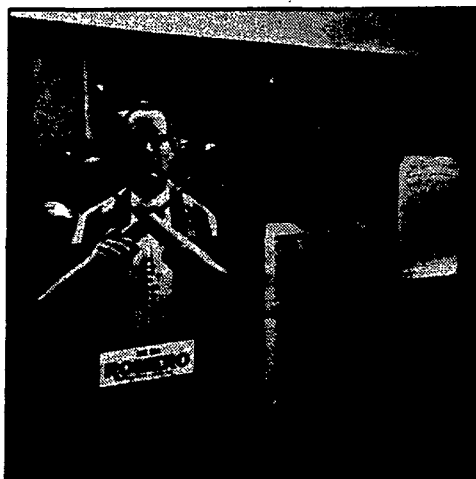
Urgent action appeals are letters sent to government officials in countries which violate Amnesty's principles. The letters are meant to warn the offending government that the world is aware of and concerned about its actions. People on whose behalf letters have been written claim the effort has saved lives, stopped torture, and improved prison conditions, according to

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Students involved in Nazareth Academy's Amnesty International group often hold meetings with their advisors, Matthew Maruggi and Sister Mary Lee Bishop (far left), to discuss upcoming events.



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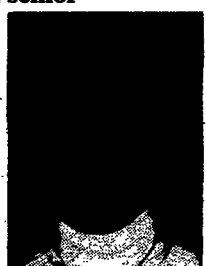
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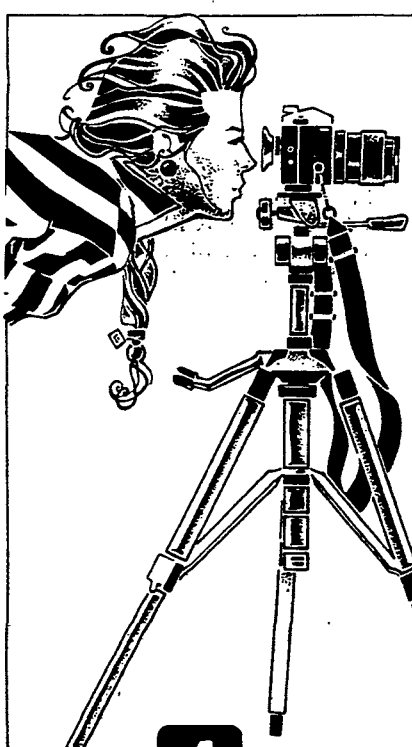
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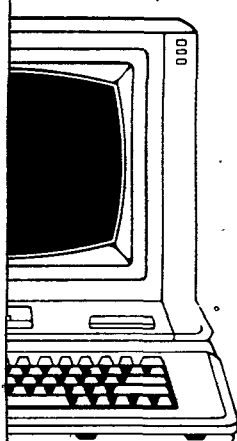

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