

Young activist hopes to win prisoners' freedom

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

SCOTTSVILLE — The sun's rays that poured through the dining room window in her family's home illuminated Nuala Hetzler from behind.

But the light seemed to contrast sharply with the dark stories of imprisonment and torture that concerned her.

In particular, Hetzler talked about a Syrian man who has been imprisoned for peacefully opposing the country's brutal ruling regime.

Together with her friends, the Nazareth Academy senior has thrown the man birthday parties and written him post-cards. But they have yet to meet political prisoner Fadil-al-Fadil.

"We haven't heard anything about Fadil," she said. "Sometimes, that can get discouraging."

Hetzler learned of his plight through Amnesty International, a human-rights organization based in London.

She runs an Amnesty chapter at Nazareth, where about 20 students participate in regular letter-writing sessions on behalf of men, women and children imprisoned throughout the world for peacefully expressing their political and/or religious beliefs.

Students address their letters to various governmental leaders who are asked to respect the rights of those they are detaining. Hetzler sees her activism on the prisoners' behalf as the essential duty of a free U.S. citizen.

"Something I cherish a lot is my freedom," Hetzler said. "I just don't sit back and enjoy the ride — I do something about it."

The Nazareth senior seems to get involved with just about anything that threatens the survival of the human race, she said. Hetzler has also worked on issues ranging from stopping environmental pollution to learning how to advise people seeking conscientious-objector status.

Yet she strikes the observer as far from a sullen activist, bent on saving the world from itself. A bright, cheery and athletic young woman, Hetzler drops the word "fun" into most of her sentences. She admits that she can get distracted from serious matters when something more interesting beckons.

On a summer trip to the former Soviet Union two years ago, for example, Hetzler admitted longing to skip out on a studious tour of one region's industrial sector.

She had just seen a sunflower field and wanted the

tour bus to stop so she and her friends could stop and smell the flowers.

Nonetheless, Hetzler always talks of her journeys, which have also taken her to Ireland, Denmark and Finland, in ponderous terms that evoke a world made up of haves and have-nots. Indeed, its impoverished gypsies were her most vivid memory of Moscow.

"The minute we got off the bus, the children surrounded us screaming for money, and biting us if we didn't have any," she recalled.

Hetzler seems to have a sharp eye for the misfortune of others. She credits several family members for forming that vision, among them a photo-journalist uncle who has traveled in war-torn Central America and the Middle East. She also has an Irish grandfather who grew up in Belfast, Northern Ireland, a city marked by decades of civil strife.

"He used to tell us stories ... of sitting under a kitchen table drinking tea with his friends as the bullets whizzed by," she said.

Her mother, Diedre Hetzler, serves as pastor at St. Mary's of the Assumption, 99 Main St., and the daughter cited her as someone who has also encouraged her concern for others. Together with her identical twin sister, Brigid, Nuala spends a little more than an hour each Sunday at her mother's parish, taking care of parishioners' children.

Hetzler has also participated in a number of diocesan retreats. She and Brigid won 1992 Hands of Christ awards distributed May 3 at Bishop's Day with Youth in Rochester. Nuala credits her faith for strengthening her activism.

"It's a strong foundation for me," she said. "I kind of build off it and include it."

As for building a future, Hetzler will major in marine biology this fall at Stonehill College in North Easton, Mass. She picked her major, in part, because she wants to help save such ocean dwellers as dolphins from commercial fishing boats.

For all her international concern, though, Hetzler admits she only knows one other language than English — Latin.

"I'll be ready to talk to the Pope," she joked.



Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor

Sporting an Earth Day T-shirt, Nazareth Academy senior Nuala Hetzler stands in front of her bedroom door, which is decorated with various signs promoting the peace and justice causes near to her heart.

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