

a Young Adult's

Fisher students fight for 'sweat-free' college

St. John Fisher College students Brigid Tobin, 21, a senior majoring in management, human resources and marketing, and Erin Quartley, 20, a junior majoring in biology, are attempting to make the world a better place for the workers who make their college's sweatshirts.

In so doing, the students want Fisher to join the growing number of campuses across the nation that have declared themselves "sweatshop free." Such colleges and universities try to buy their sweatshirts and other clothing items only from sneaker and apparel manufacturers that uphold universally recognized labor standards in their factories. Such standards include: safe and clean working environments, wages that enable workers to support their families, an end to use of child labor, the right to organize into unions, and increased wages for both regular and overtime hours.

As of this month, 62 colleges and

Story by Rob Cullivan

universities have joined the Worker Rights Consortium, a group of pro-labor organizations that support a code of conduct in clothing factories, and independent monitoring of such sites. Meanwhile, other academic institutions are already on board with the Fair Labor Association, an agreement forged among the U.S. government, clothing manufacturers and various labor and human rights groups in 1996. Fisher's campus store — Barnes & Noble Booksellers — and apparel suppliers, Nike and Reebok, are FLA supporters, according to Father Paul English, CSB, director of campus ministry. However, some anti-sweatshop activists like Tobin and Quartley have criticized provisions of the FLA they feel give too much say to the apparel manufacturers themselves, and a code of conduct less stringent than the consortium's.

Either way, the students noted, both agreements do point to one reality — colleges are being asked to take a stand on workers' rights, and Fisher has now joined the ranks of campuses where the global economy's impact on the poor is being examined.

"We want the college to uphold our Catholic morals," explained Tobin, who attends St. John the Baptist Church, Lockport.

Quartley said that she has researched sweatshops both in the United States and abroad and found them to be polluted, unsafe places where most U.S. workers would not want to be employed.

"I hate to see people in these conditions, and if the roles had been reversed, I could have been there," said Quartley, a parishioner at St. Helen's Church, Gates.

Quartley and Tobin are slated to address the Fisher faculty assembly Tuesday, Nov. 7, and ask it to pass an anti-sweatshop resolution. Both of the students have buttonholed faculty members, and said they have been encouraged by the response they've garnered. The two young women also said student government leaders will support them if a majority of the school's students vote to support the resolution in a referendum that is yet to be slated. In part, the resolution points out that "most if not all of the (college's) apparel and equipment is produced under labor conditions, even within the continental U.S., which are neither just nor supportive of a whole and healthy



Erin Quartley, 20, of Rochester (left) and Brigid Tobin, 21, of Lockport, are both students at St. John Fisher College and are fighting for a "sweatshop-free" campus.

human life for laborers ..."

Father English and Dierdre McKiernan Hetzler, a campus minister, have been aiding the women in their efforts, and note that with faculty and student support behind them, Fisher's administration is more likely to consider adopting a sweatshop-free stance.

Both students came to their concern about workers' rights via different routes.

For Tobin, it was the visit to campus last March of Craig Kielburger, a Toronto Catholic teen who founded Free the Children, an organization that fights against sweatshops and also builds schools in poor countries for children. Tobin said Kielburger's talk inspired her to take up the cause of workers' rights.

Quartley said she learned about sweatshop abuses by researching a paper for a class on peace studies she took at Fisher. The paper, which she wrote with three other students, concluded that sweatshops were a threat to peace because they fostered abuse of

employees, and, in that sense, were a form of violence.

The women hastened to add that they are not calling for Fisher to boycott apparel manufacturers, but to work with such manufacturers to improve their factories' conditions. For example, they said, if wages were doubled at many garment factories where workers make pennies per hour, clothing prices would rise by only a dollar or two over current prices.

"We're not asking for these factories to be shut down," Tobin said.

"We're just asking that the conditions be improved to a reasonable standard," Quartley added.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: To learn more about this issue, visit the following Web sites: for information on the Fair Labor Association, <http://www.fla.org/sweatshop/faq.htm>; on the Worker Rights Consortium, http://www.workersrights.org/executive_summary.html; on Nike's point of view, www.NikeBiz.com.

Events

For information, call Odyssey, the diocesan-sponsored young adults network, at 716/328-3228, ext. 375.

© Wednesday, Nov. 1: Catholic Coffee House at St. John Fisher College, 3690 East Ave., Rochester, 7:30-9:30 p.m. Discussion on Catholicism and other faiths.

© Saturday, Nov. 4: Board game night at St. John the Evangelist Church, Greece, 7-11 p.m.

© Tuesday, Nov. 7: Film "Good Kurds, Bad Kurds" details Turkish campaign against Kurds. 8 p.m. Basil Hall, St. John Fisher College, Rochester. Free and open to the public. Info: 716/385-8249.

© Friday, Nov. 10: Movie night.

© Tuesday, Nov. 14: Film "Well-Founded Fear" on political asylum in United States. 8 p.m., Basil Hall Theatre, St. John Fisher College, Rochester. Free and open to the public. Info: 716/385-8249.

© Thursday, Nov. 16: Dinner at the Elmwood Inn Restaurant, 1256 Mt. Hope Ave., Rochester, at 7 p.m.

© Saturday, Nov. 18: Seneca Lake Wine Trail Tour. Meet at Wegman's Food Market, 1750 East Ave., Rochester, at 9 a.m.

© Wednesday, Nov. 29: Catholic Coffee House, St. John Fisher College, Rochester, 7:30-9:30 p.m. Discussion on "A Catholic Understanding of Scripture."

© Thursday, Nov. 30: Caroling on Park Avenue, Rochester. 8-9 p.m.

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