

Young

Pursuing social justice in between studying

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STAFF WRITER

Many a college student is ready to party hard on any given Friday night, since they rarely have classes the next day.

Yet a few Nazareth College students prefer to spend some of their Friday nights taking care of others at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, a Catholic Worker shelter and soup kitchen on South Avenue in Rochester. They welcome the shelter's male guests, distribute blankets in a room filled with couches and help guests who wish to do their laundry.

One of the student volunteers, Steve Shaffer, 23, doesn't mind missing out on the weekend party scene that attracts so many of his peers.

"I don't drink. I don't smoke. And I don't like bars that are smoky and full of alcohol," he said.

In fact, Shaffer, a graduate student pursuing a master's degree in physical therapy, said he likes sleeping overnight at the shelter because he sometimes uses the quiet hours after the guests have bedded down to study.

Shaffer and fellow St. Joseph's volunteer Sara Cuervo, 21, are members of Nazareth's Social Justice Group. Cuervo, who majors in English literature and religious studies, doesn't share Shaffer's aversion to alcohol, but said volunteering at St. Joseph's "just feels more worthwhile than drinking."

"It just feels good to be out doing something," she added.

Volunteering at St. Joseph's is just one of many activities members of the Social Justice Group have undertaken in the four years since the group was formed. Group members also have participated in protests against the U.S.-supported United Nations embargo on Iraq, which critics claim has fostered the deaths of more than one million Iraqis.

The group meets weekly and has about a dozen members. It formed four years ago when Catholic Worker and Nazareth teacher Harry Murray asked some students if they wanted to accompany him to a protest against the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security and Cooperation, then known as the School of the Americas. Located at Fort Benning, Ga., the institute has been accused of training Latin American soldiers to target civilians, including Catholic church workers, who oppose various Latin American governments and their policies. The institute's defenders maintain the school actually works to mitigate human rights abuses by its graduates.

Shaffer said he went on the trip and ended up liking his fellow group members. He has been active ever since, and particularly likes the group's focus on nonviolent activities.

"I seem to have found Jesus through nonviolence," he said, adding that he was led to reflect on Jesus' message of love and nonviolence by reading Mahatma Gandhi, the famed Indian independence leader.

"I spend a lot of time with Catholics and other Christians, and believe Christianity to have great potential in terms of peace and justice," he said.

On Good Friday this year, group members also joined other local Catholic activists who prayed the Stations of the Cross at various corporate and government sites in Rochester they see as symbolic of institutions and policies that oppress the poor. For example, the activists left several small dolls at the



James Stein/Photo Intern

Nazareth College students Steve Shaffer and Sara Cuervo prepare supplies April 19 for guests of Rochester's St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, a Catholic Worker shelter and soup kitchen. Shaffer and Cuervo, both members of Nazareth's Social Justice Group, occasionally volunteer at the shelter.

downtown Federal Building to symbolize the deaths of innocent civilians from U.S. bombing in Afghanistan. And some members of the group traveled to Washington, D.C., the weekend of April 21-22 to participate in protests against U.S. policy in Colombia and other perceived ills, including the war on terrorism.

"It is a war without clear objectives and no end, similar to the failed war on drugs," according to Eric Eggleston, a member of the Social Justice Group who went to Washington, D.C.

A 21-year-old Nazareth student studying sociology and religion, Eggleston was sharply critical of the war on terrorism. He said the news media did not ask enough critical questions of U.S. policy makers to keep the war from starting, and expressed concern that the U.S. government had discussed the possibility of using nuclear weapons against terrorists.

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"(W)e are setting dangerous and potentially disastrous precedents," he said.

For asking these kinds of questions, and for working with the poor, the Nazareth Social Justice Group earned a Dove Award from The Rochester Committee on Latin America, a not-for-profit group often critical of U.S. policy in Latin America. Along with representatives of St. Joseph's House, which also received a Dove, the Social Justice Group accepted the award at a dinner in March.

Among the reasons RCOLA gave the group a Dove Award were that various members had researched violence against women attending Nazareth and organized actions to support them; had traveled with peace delegations to Mexico and Guatemala; and had worked on anti-sweatshop campaigns.

Although he serves as an informal adviser, Murray said the students pretty much set the agenda for the Social Justice Group.

"Although I have had some role in setting the issues, over time, the students have increasingly come to define their own issues, often drawing on ideas they have gotten through other contacts," he said. "For instance, the focus on sweatshops came from a trip to the (University of Rochester) ... which brought Naz students in contact with U of R sweatshop activists."

Group members said they want to continue social justice work after they leave Nazareth.

"I don't think I have another option," Eggleston said. "That pesky conscience of mine yells too loud to ignore."

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