

a Young

Leader left fingerprints on Rochester region

Few young adults would consider an arrest record part and parcel of the career they had chosen. Then again, few young adults seek the career Eric LeCompte has chosen for himself.

LeCompte was recently elected to serve as board chair of Pax Christi USA, a national Catholic peace organization based in Washington, D.C. In his 26 years of life, the former Rochester resident has counseled conscientious objectors in Colombia who didn't want to serve in that nation's army and traveled to Cuba with medicines to "break" the U.S. embargo against that nation.

LeCompte is a 1999 graduate of the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University in Minnesota, with a bachelor's degree in sociology and peace studies. His path to a prominent position with Pax Christi included a stop in the Rochester city courts, where he learned firsthand about civil disobedience.

LeCompte, a native of Oaklawn, Ill., was arrested in July 1995, along with Nazareth College professor Harry Murray and Paul Tremblay for leaving inky fingerprints on the walls of the Monroe County Department of Social Services in Rochester. Murray and Tremblay were former residents of St. Joseph's House of Hospitality in Rochester, a Catholic Worker facility, where LeCompte was working at the time. The trio eventually were sentenced to perform 30 hours of community service and develop a nonviolence curriculum for Rochester city schools in reparation for their act of civil disobedience.

The fingerprinting trio took the action at the DSS office to protest what they saw as the dehumanization and "criminalization" of welfare recipients through the finger-imaging process that was mandated in 1994. Finger-imaging was implemented in order to stem welfare recipients from "double-dipping," or fraudulently identifying themselves in order to gain more benefits than they should be receiving.

LeCompte, then barely out of high school, came to Rochester from Oaklawn because he had developed an interest in his faith during high school. After working as a volunteer with a number of service organizations, he realized he wanted to move beyond simply helping the poor to asking why people were poor. He eschewed enrolling in college immediately after high school because he felt most colleges taught their students to "consume and produce." He learned about St. Joseph's House through a Marist brother who was friends with some Rochesterians who had worked there, and decided to spend a year there himself.

It was at St. Joseph's, he said during a phone interview, that he realized who he was serving: Christ crucified in the poor. Yet, LeCompte remembered that when he first saw a cross in a church as a child, the last thing he thought was serving the man it portrayed.

As his parents explained to him that

Story by Rob Cullivan

was Jesus, God's son, and that all were God's children, LeCompte mentally shrank in horror.

"I remember looking up at the cross and thinking, 'If that's what happens to the children of God, I want no part of it.'"

However, as he doled out meals to guests of St. Joseph's, which operates a daily soup kitchen, he had an insight about his early experience looking at the cross. The faces of his guests reminded him of the tortured Jesus from whom he shrank so many years before, he said.

While in Rochester, LeCompte traveled with a delegation of local activists to Guatemala where he investigated human rights abuses in the country, which had been torn by a civil war between rebels and a U.S.-backed regime. While in Rochester, he also heard a speech by Maryknoll Father Roy Bourgeois, a Navy veteran and former missionary who founded SOA Watch, which is devoted to closing down the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation at Fort Benning, Ga. Opponents claim the Institute — formerly named the School of the Americas — has trained Latin American military personnel, including those in Guatemala, to harass, persecute and kill government opponents, including Catholic clergy and religious, in various Latin America countries. The institute's defenders claim it has reformed its ways, and currently serves to actually decrease human-rights violations among its graduates.

Today, in addition to his Pax Christi position, LeCompte also serves as SOA Watch's outreach director. Both positions put him on the front lines of opposition to U.S. policies he sees as harmful to the world's poor. For example, he opposes U.S.-backed United Nations economic sanctions against Iraq as harming only its people, and not the government it is supposed to hurt. He added that Pax Christi is currently enlisting hundreds of people across the country to engage in peaceful civil disobedience against federal government sites if the United States initiates war with Iraq.

LeCompte believes a war against Iraq may engender hostility to the United States throughout the Middle East, and said he believes the U.S. policy of supporting "cruel dictators" in that region led to the creation of the "cruel militants" who attacked America Sept. 11.

LeCompte was also skeptical that the "regime change" the Bush administration is advocating in Iraq would lead to a situation better than the nation's current state. He questioned U.S. support for dictatorial regimes, noting that the United States played a crucial role in arming Iraq's military before the Gulf War.

"How many times will the U.S. government fight the same people it put into power?" he asked rhetorically.



Photo courtesy of Linda Panetta, SOA Watch/NE

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