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Jesuit High School sends delegation to Fort Benning vigil

by Thomas C. Fox



Jesuit-run Rockhurst High, in Kansas City, Mo., boasts a superb

college preparatory education, enriched by Ignatian spirituality, which combines, prayer, reflection and a commitment to justice.

And while the school says academic excellence is its hallmark, it does not shy from letting people know that it has had more than a few athletic successes in recent years. For example, Rockhurst has produced state-acclaimed championship teams during the 2007 or 2008 seasons in football, golf, lacrosse, soccer, swimming and tennis.

This year it is doing something else being acclaimed locally. It is sending nine students to Fort Benning, Ga., to join thousands of other young folks, many from other Jesuit high schools and colleges, to vigil for the closure of the U.S. Army School of the Americas (SOA), now named the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. Eight of the students are Rockhurst seniors; one, Andrew Lombardo, is a junior.

The weekend trek was organized by a lay theology teacher and moderator of the school's Justice League Club, Marvin Grilliot, a 35-year-old Catholic educator.

Why the SOA trip? I asked Grilliot.

?We have an opportunity to take a physical stand that says we are committed to nonviolence, compassion, justice, dignity and life,? he responded in an e-mail. ?The spirituality of the SOA demonstration has always been powerful for me.? This year marks his fifth year as a teacher at Rockurst High and the fourth time he has traveled to Fort Benning for the annual November gathering.

?People gather,? he said, ?because our faith of love demands it.?

?Personally, part of my connection for going is to express solidarity with the poor in Latin America; to say that we hear them. I want to grieve with the victims of the violence who were killed by soldiers trained, at least partially by, the School of the Americas and paid for by me [as a U.S. taxpayer].?

The SOA demonstration has strong Jesuit connections. It comes each year just days after the anniversary of the deaths of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter, slain by the Salvadoran military in 1989, who allegedly acted under orders from officers trained at SOA.

Part of the vigil at Fort Benning includes an ?Ignatian Teach-in,? which reaffirms the Jesuit tradition of working for justice. ?I think it?s great,? said Grilliot, ?that the students will feel a national and international connection to other students at Jesuit institutions. Seeing so many powerful young people is encouraging.?

To get a better handle on the thinking of some of the students who will accompany Grilliot by bus as part of a contingent of some 75 participants from the metropolitan Kansas City area I asked them to tell me by e-mail who or what has inspired them to go and what they hope to get out of the experience.

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Tony Trabon

Mr. Grilliot, the Justice League moderator at Rockhurst, has spoken highly of the experience and I saw it as an opportunity to take part in a unified cause. It is a chance to actually put my thoughts about living a just life into action.

I hope that I can meet many people who will help shape my thoughts on justice and also bring the inspiration and enthusiasm back to my community.

Matt Bommarito

The person who inspired me most to go on this trip is the moderator of the Justice League Club and theology teacher, Mr. Marvin Grilliot. When he told me about it during the summer, it sounded like a good cause and a lot of fun too. Plus it is a way to act in solidarity with those who have been directly affected by [graduates of the SOA.]

As I?ve never been to a protest before, I'm looking forward to seeing exactly how everything works. ? The ideal accomplishment would be to shut down the school, but I'm not sure if that will happen. At least we are ? spreading awareness of the situation.

I first heard about the SOA trip through the moderator of our social justice group, Mr. Marvin Grilliot, and also from Br. Louis Rodemann [of Holy Family Catholic Worker House]. I was inspired to go because I wanted to be a part of something as special as 25,000 activists pushing the limits of democracy

and fighting for social justice.

Braden Agpoon

First and foremost, I hope that we can send a strong enough message to our representatives that they close down the school. In addition, I hope to meet like-minded youth, find out what they are doing, and use what I learn to help our Rockhurst group have a greater impact at Rockhurst, in the Kansas City community, and, ultimately, in the world.

We are doing other justice events as well. One upcoming event we have is the Fair Trade Fair where we invite local fair trade businesses, such as 10,000 Villages, Work of Human Hands, and a few others, as well as charities such as the Christian Foundation for Children and Aging to come and sell goods that we know provide the Third World laborers with a life of dignity and a living wage. We promote the event as Christmas with a Conscience.

Matthew Ryan

My family was extremely supportive of my decision to attend the protest, and I almost felt obligated to take a stand against these injustices. As a teenager living out the models of Jesus Christ and St. Ignatius, I was compelled to attend the protest.

This trip is awesome, because just in our being there, we accomplish so much. Our presence shows our commitment to improving society. In addition, I hope to educate myself on the school [of the Americas] and I hope to gain further insight and appreciation into living a life of justice and faith.

Andrew Lombardo

For me, inspiration to go came from my passion for social justice. As a member of the Justice League, I am aware of the human rights violations that occur around the world every day and this trip is a way to get involved close to home.

By going on the trip, I hope to become more aware of the situation at the School of the Americas and in doing so be able to share what I have learned with others.

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