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College journalists' stories open students' eyes to world issues

Barbara Fraser Catholic News Service | Jun. 11, 2008

LIMA, Peru (CNS) -- When Meghan Hurley got word that she had won the Eileen Egan Award for journalists, she was doing volunteer work with teenage girls high in the Andes Mountains, half a world away from Cabrini College in Radnor, Pa.

The award-winning series of stories by Hurley and fellow student Amanda Finnegan helped spur the college's food service to add fair-trade coffee and other items to its menus and won the two a trip to another part of the world -- the Middle East -- to see the work that Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' international aid and development agency, is doing with Iraqi refugees.

It is the first time journalists have won CRS's Egan award for stories published in a college paper.

Tamara Jones of The Washington Post, one of the contest judges, praised the writers for their "good explanation of the issue and good initiative in exploring how other campuses are addressing fair trade."

Both Hurley, who graduated in 2007, and Finnegan, who graduated in May, majored in English and communications. During her last semester, Hurley worked as an intern in Catholic Relief Services' northeast regional office in Radnor.

That is where she learned about fair trade, a system that combines commerce and solidarity, ensuring that farmers and crafters from developing countries receive a fair price for their products, that their working conditions are safe and just, and that the benefits go to them and their communities rather than middlemen.

Hurley suspected that as a Catholic college Cabrini could -- and should -- do more to support fair trade. Her colleagues at the newspaper, The Loquitur, agreed.

"She helped raise awareness in our staff about fair-trade issues," Finnegan said.

Cabrini was fertile ground for action. The college has a partnership with Catholic Relief Services to raise awareness about social justice, and courses apply Catholic social teaching to everyday life.

"Community service is at the core of what the college believes and what Mother Cabrini believed," Finnegan, of North Plainfield, N.J., told Catholic News Service. "And it really became part of our newspaper, trying to take these issues and show other kids on campus that this is something you need to pay attention to."

Finnegan gives Hurley the credit for promoting fair trade on campus, but her colleague is just as quick to praise the efforts of other students.

"My part was really tiny," said Hurley, of Medford Lakes, N.J. "I had a lot of help and encouragement and support from a lot of people on campus, and other people have kept it going."

The women's first story was published in The Loquitur in February 2007, along with an editorial urging the

school to carry more fair-trade products. By the end of that semester, "we had an agreement that two (fair-trade coffee) brands were going to be available every day on campus, and that the catering service on campus was going to serve fair-trade coffee exclusively," Hurley said.

The campus food service provider, Sodexho, now offers fair-trade bananas, as well, and the athletics department uses fair-trade sports equipment. A fair-trade volleyball festival, Christmas bazaar and chocolate sale kept the issue in the public eye.

The work by Hurley and Finnegan was "the first series of stories on global social justice issues that began to appear in the newspaper," said Jerry Zurek, an English and communications professor who is adviser to The Loquitur.

"This really was the kickoff, not just of the fair-trade movement on campus, but of students looking at their roles as global citizens and as global journalists," he said.

Since then, Cabrini students have written on Iraqi refugees and HIV/AIDS in Africa, and this summer they are researching stories on the global food crisis.

"They find it so exciting to be writing on issues that matter. It's opened up the world to them. They fight over who's going to do which story," Zurek told CNS.

While she became aware of trade issues as a student, Hurley has gotten a closer look at the inequalities between developing and industrialized countries since November, when she arrived in Peru as a member of the Good Shepherd Volunteers.

With the Good Shepherd Sisters in Cusco, a highland city best known as the jumping-off point for visits to the famous Inca ruins of Machu Picchu, Hurley works with teenage girls from poor communities who have moved to the city to get a high school education. She helps in the bakery where they work to earn money for school, assists them with homework, teaches English and lends a friendly ear.

When her two-year volunteer commitment is over, she hopes to either get a job at a newspaper or pursue graduate studies in international development.

Finnegan, who did an internship at The Washington Post and worked at The Philadelphia Inquirer during her last year at Cabrini, is due to start a new job at the Las Vegas Sun June 23. She looks forward to the trip to the Middle East later in the year.

"I'd like to report overseas, so this is a great start for a college kid," she said.

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