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Students Raise Eyebrows at Statehouse

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A delegation of more than 20 University of Dayton human rights studies faculty and students raised eyebrows at the Ohio state capitol building this week.

"From a couple of the meetings we attended, I can tell you we were raising the eyebrows of the legislators and senior staffers with the info we gave them," said senior Alex Kreidenweis of Cincinnati, part of the delegation in Columbus, Ohio, to lobby state legislators on proposed legislation to combat human trafficking. "You could tell they had not heard about this."

The delegation's trip coincided with Human Trafficking Awareness Day Monday, Jan. 11, at the Ohio Statehouse, presented by State Senator Teresa Fedor (D-Toledo).

Human Trafficking Awareness Day involved legislators, law enforcement officials, social service providers and others combating human trafficking and working with victims in Ohio. Mark Lagon, CEO of the Polaris Project, delivered the keynote address. Ohio Attorney General Richard Cordray provided remarks.

"We felt that human trafficking in Ohio is an under-appreciated problem among state legislators," said Kreidenweis, who represented a new University of Dayton student group called the New Abolitionist Movement. "We wanted to make sure lawmakers were aware of Sen. Fedor's legislation. This was a good next step in combating modern-day slavery. We raised some awareness. The next step is to get (legislation) passed."

In November, Mark Ensalaco, director of the University's human rights studies program, organized the Dayton Human Trafficking Accords international conference at the University of Dayton. The University event also brought together law enforcement officials, victims' advocates, academic experts, students and the public for what Ensalaco said was to stir society's conscience to action against trafficking and slavery.

"Building on our human trafficking conference and, specifically, the desire it engendered among student attendees to 'do something,' we wanted to attend this conference and spend time lobbying state legislators, particularly those representing the Dayton area, on the bill and broader issue," said Jason Pierce, chair of the University of Dayton political science department, where the human rights studies program resides.

The Dayton Human Trafficking Accords conference was one in a series of conferences organized by the University of Dayton to address human rights issues, such as violence against women and the rights of children. In October 2008, at a campus event held in partnership with the Minneapolis-based Center for Victims of Torture, University of Dayton President Daniel J. Curran and Cincinnati Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk signed a national petition calling for the president of the United States to reject torture.

The University of Dayton is a pioneer in human rights education. In 1998, the University launched the country's first undergraduate human rights program. In 2007, the University of Dayton began offering a bachelor's degree in human rights studies.

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