11-12-1998

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Recommended Citation
"UD Students to Take Part in Protest Against School of the Americas" (1998). News Releases. 8642.
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UD STUDENTS TO TAKE PART IN PROTEST AGAINST SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAS

DAYTON, Ohio — Several University of Dayton students are willing to be arrested for a cause they believe in.

Fifteen UD students, along with an expected 2,000 or more people, will be protesting the U.S. Army-sponsored School of the Americas at Fort Benning in Columbus, Ga. Many of the students say they are willing to cross the Fort Benning property line during the protest and risk arrest.

The School of the Americas trains thousands of Latin American soldiers each year. Many of the school’s graduates have been linked to murders and other human rights violations throughout Latin America, say critics.

Rachel Hellmann, a senior visual arts major from Terre Haute, Ind., said she became convinced that closing the School of the Americas was a cause worth fighting for after she spent a month in Bogota, Colombia, last summer. While in Colombia, she attended a workshop with three other UD students on “Building Peace in a Conflicted Society” and learned about the various political conflicts in the country.

“When people in those countries rise up and speak out, they put their lives at risk. Comparatively, we risk nothing. It would be a shame to do nothing,” she said.

Hellmann said she plans on crossing the property line. “The only question that I have is whether crossing the line actually makes more of a statement than just being there,” she said.

About 600 of the estimated 2,000 people who attended last year’s vigil and protest crossed the property line and were arrested. According to the School of the Americas (SOA) Watch Web site at http://www.soaw.org/, the 600 people were processed at the Army base and released the same day without being charged or prosecuted.

However, those who had crossed the line for a second time were charged with criminal trespassing, sentenced to six months in prison and fined $3,000. The Rev. Roy Bourgeois, founder of the SOA Watch, is still serving jail time for his protest activities.

Rebecca Jones, a UD sophomore from Washington, D.C., will also take part in the vigil. However, she is not convinced that crossing the line will make more of a difference than simply showing solidarity with the others who attend the vigil. She said she’s made a “conscious and prayerful decision” to not cross the line.

Jones is a member of Pax Christi, a UD student chapter of the national organization that focuses on human rights issues. Pax Christi and the Amnesty International group on campus have held weekly meetings to raise awareness and get students involved in the protest against
the School of the Americas.

"It's an issue that a lot of people don't know anything about," she said. "But I've seen how it's become an issue here on campus. People are seeing that it's something that needs to have some attention drawn to it. When I see that working on campus, I see how it could work on a widespread scale throughout the country," Jones said.

She said she's become more aware of the people in other countries "who do not have a say in what goes on in their country," she said. "I do have a voice and I want to take advantage of that opportunity."

Brother Phil Aaron, S.M., a campus minister, will accompany the students to the protest. "I'm going mostly to support the students," he said. While this will be his first protest at the school, Aaron said he's been involved in the issue by writing letters to Congress.

On Sept. 17, 1998, an amendment in Congress to cut funds to the School of the Americas was defeated by a narrow margin, 212-201. The amendment was sponsored by Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Rep. Esteban Torres (D-Cal.).

The annual SOA Watch protest is held at Fort Benning to commemorate the Nov. 16, 1989, assassination of six Jesuit priests and two women co-workers in El Salvador. According to the U.N. Truth Commission, 19 of the 26 Salvadorian army officers cited for the murders were trained at the School of the Americas.

Graduates from the school include Manuel Noriega of Panama; Roberto D'Aubuisson, an accused death squad leader in El Salvador; and Paucelino Latorre Gamboa, Colombian commander of the 20th Brigade that was implicated in the February 1998 murders of three human rights activists.

Supporters of the School of the Americas say the school has implemented more human rights training and that the graduates who've committed human rights violations do not represent the group as a whole.

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