

USM Captivates High School Students During First Ever Global Human Rights Conference

By Bryan Schrepel

On April 20, the University of Saint Mary Lawrence D. Starr Global Studies Institute held its first ever Global Human Rights Conference for Kansas City area high school students. The conference joined USM students with area high school students for a day-long exercise in critical thinking.



High school students discuss Guatemalan land control during the first ever USM Global Studies High School Global Human Rights Conference.

Using the war-torn country of Guatemala, USM students acted as facilitators, leading high school students in an analysis of real-world issues that affect not only the Guatemalan people, but the global society at large. The goal of the conference was to explore political, cultural, and social justice issues, in order to devise a peaceful, common identity for the people of Guatemala.

Students from Atchison, Bishop LeBlonde, Cristo Rey, Immaculata, and Lansing High Schools were assigned group roles that encompassed everything from the Guatemalan government and military control, to U.S.-Guatemalan relations. Each group was charged with resolving conflicts based on three major issues:



protection of human rights, Mayan cultural and political rights, and land and environment conflicts. Groups later convened to negotiate, and discuss the topics, developing a core identity in the process.

The simulation was led by Dr. Natalie Riegg, professor of political science and global studies, Dr. Randy Scott, professor of political science and director of the Lawrence D. Starr Global Studies Institute, and Dr.



Vanessa Campagna, a Saint Mary theatre major, made three Mayan gods, to get high school students immersed in the culture of Guatemala as they prepared to bring Guatemala from truce to peace, through a workable peace simulation addressing powerful social justice issues.

Gretchen Wilbur, dean for assessment and education professor.

Dr. Riegg gained the inspiration for the conference from Harvard University, and actually held similar, smaller simulations with USM students at her house throughout the year.



“Role playing simulations of real life are very effective alternative methods of learning,” Dr. Riegg said. “They stimulate thinking, creativity, reflection, and self-reflection.”

Students walked away from the experience with a profound sense of respect for the negotiating process and a deeper understanding of the value of human rights. Dr. Scott said the conference was a great opportunity to unite USM students with high school students for what he called “peer-to-peer” instruction.

“We were trying to build a collaborative effort between our students and high school students so both could benefit, while at the same time, exposing our institute to a broader base,” said Scott. “Based on the reflections and reactions, I think everything went according to plan.”



USM junior Jorge Rojas led the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity Group (URNG) group during the human rights conference. Rojas even dressed the part of "Comandante X" for the conference, wearing combat boots and a militant beret.

Dr. Scott also mentioned that the Class of 2007 is the most decorated group of history, political science,

or global studies majors at USM to date. One of those students is Noel Myhand. Myhand plans to attend graduate school at the University of Kansas next fall. She led the group of Mayan representatives.

"Not only does this get great exposure for Saint Mary, it gets high school students involved with our own students," she said. "It was a great, engaging process for both. I was surprised by how much I got from it myself," Myhand said.

USM junior Jorge Rojas agreed. Dressed for combat as a guerilla rebel, equipped with combat boots and beret, Rojas was surprised by the students' eagerness to get involved.

"There is a perception that young people are becoming more and more apathetic, but we had a great group of students, and they were very eager to

learn what's going on," Rojas said. "As an academic institution that prides itself on its liberal arts reputation, exercises like this are crucial for us and the community. We need to do similar things like this more often."

At the end of the day USM made a scholarship offer of \$2,000 per year for four years to any senior at the conference who applied, was accepted, and attended the University of Saint Mary starting in the fall of 2007. ♣



USM students, faculty, staff, and area high school students come together before the conference's conclusion.