Fighting for our Dreams

by Sara Martinez

As our membership grew, the NYSYLC started a mentoring program that partners undocumented high school students with college students to help them in the college process. We are currently in our second cycle of mentoring. We also raise funds for our own scholarship program and distribute information about other resources that undocumented students can qualify for.

More than a year ago, the NYSYLC started working on the NY Dream Act, a state bill that would equalize access to higher education by opening state financial aid to students regardless of immigration status. We have been building momentum for the NY Dream Act by organizing and participating in petition drives, town halls, a statewide week of action, an action day in Albany, and a 150-mile walk from New York City to Albany to gather support for the bill in upstate communities. We also held a rally and civil disobedience.
A Word from Nikki, the first Sara Bilezikian Peace Intern

Ten years ago, in the spring of 2002, many of us were grieving for Sara Bilezikian, a dynamic activist not yet 24 years old, who took her own life on January 12 of that year. Sara was one of the early participants in the Freeman Internship Program at the Muste Institute, which supports young activists internining at the War Resisters League (WRL) office. Sophie and John Bilezikian are now honoring their daughter with the creation of the Sara Ann Bilezikian Peace Internship Endowment, providing a new source of support for young activists contributing their skills to WRL’s educational and organizing work. The new fund’s first intern, Nikki Rankine, began her work at WRL in the fall of 2011, and on January 16, 2012—Martin Luther King Jr. Day—she helped kick off the internship program at an event that included Sara’s parents and other family and friends, and members and supporters of the Muste Institute and WRL. Here’s what Nikki told us about her experience:

My journey with War Resisters League began in the fall of 2011 and has been graciously extended until the end of spring of 2012. As the first intern of the Sara Bilezikian internship program I have been honored with the opportunity to contribute to the War Resisters League’s efforts to resist war both at home and abroad. This internship has provided a platform for me to understand how to achieve peace through nonviolent action while striving for structural and institutional change. This resistance embodies the legacy and the spirit that the late Sara Bilezikian brought to the League as an intern in the 90s—a spirit I aspire to bring to the WRL office with every task and duty I am assigned as the Sara Bilezikian intern.

I was not fortunate enough to meet Sara while she was alive but during the Sara Bilezikian Internship launch event in January, I was able to meet some of Sara’s closest family and friends. This rare opportunity allowed me the privilege to meet people who were inspired by her deep and comprehensive understanding of how to achieve peace with justice. Through personal narratives I was able to get a more insightful comprehension of Sara’s character and especially about how her life greatly changed with the work she did with WRL.

—Nikki Rankine

Fighting for our Dreams (continued from page 1)

action in front of Governor Cuomo’s office here in New York City, where I decided to risk arrest by blocking the street with two other NYSYLC members.

I never thought I would choose to go to jail. But I felt I had to take strong action to show the urgency of the situation that undocumented youth face every day when they are unable to continue their education and fulfill their potential.

We at the NYSYLC believe that the most important responsibility we have to our members is to empower immigrant youth to drop the fear and challenge the broken immigration system. It is only when we lose our fear that we can take control of our lives and be truly empowered, no matter our undocumented status.

Dreamers walking from New York City to Albany, the state capital, are joined by local Hudson Valley activists as they prepare to cross the Rip Van Winkle Bridge over the Hudson River into Catskill, New York, on April 14.
Social Justice Fund Grants, September 2011

The Muste Institute’s Social Justice Fund makes grants for grassroots activist projects in the U.S. and around the world. If supporting nonviolent action for social justice is important to you, please donate now to help us expand this important program. Thank you!

A Community Voice (ACV), New Orleans, LA: $1,050 to organize and mobilize the underemployed and unemployed within Louisiana through community labor partnerships. ACV has held leadership trainings, created a hiring hall matching unemployed people to employment options, held community meetings and actions that led to new jobs for local residents, and engaged with local churches to support union organizing campaigns.

Culture of Peace Alliance (COPA), Tucson, AZ: $1,050 for a series of nonviolence trainings teaching the history and strategies used by Martin Luther King during the civil rights movement. COPA organized trainings throughout the region, helped create a “Peace Warriors” after-school program at a local high school, and hosted an Art & Peace Activity Center for kids at the Annual Tucson Peace Fair.

Los Alamos Study Group (LASG), Albuquerque, NM: $1,050 for an internship program to mobilize public support for redirecting federal funding from nuclear weapons toward a sustainable future for New Mexico. By distributing well-researched informational materials and organizing community meetings and actions, LASG recently won a victory: the federal government postponed plans to build a plutonium manufacturing complex — a flagship nuclear warhead project — at Los Alamos.

Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice (WNPJ), Madison, WI: $1,050 for “Bring the War $$ Home,” educating and mobilizing Wisconsin residents to press for redirecting military spending toward social needs. WNPJ develops key resources for the campaign, supports communities in presenting local “war $$ home” resolutions, and shares a digital “cost of war” counter for high-profile public displays.

Peace Pentagon Update

Here’s the latest on the Muste Institute building in downtown Manhattan:

• The building is full, and active! Three new office tenants moved in last fall: Global Revolution TV, live-streaming nonviolent uprisings from Wall Street to Tunisia, Egypt and Spain; the New York State Youth Leadership Council, a vibrant statewide group led by and for undocumented immigrant youth; and the New York City Organizing Project of the New York State United Teachers, which primarily organizes adjuncts at private educational institutions in New York City. In addition, all our retail storefronts are rented out to small creative businesses.
• The sidewalk bridge scaffolding that surrounded our building is gone, replaced with safety netting, which provides better access and visibility. Also, the Transit Authority is mostly done with their work on the adjacent subway platform, and has put in a new sidewalk.
• With help from the nonprofit Greenpoint Manufacturing and Design Center (GMDC) and various resource people, the Board is exploring how best to carry out our sheltering mission and all of our program work.

Please help by contributing to the A.J. Muste Memorial Institute today. If you indicate “sheltering” on your check or online donation form, your gift will go to provide affordable office and meeting space for our social justice movement tenants. Thank you!

EPOCA member Michael Rose testifies at a public hearing in Boston in April 2012 about new regulations that bar Massachusetts employers from discriminating against people with criminal records.

B EQUESTS GET A BOOST

Thanks to a bequest left to the Muste Institute by a longtime supporter, we are increasing by 75% the amount available for grants in the next three cycles of our Social Justice Fund. Bequests are a great way to ensure that the next generation of activists will have the concrete resources they need to carry on the movement. You can designate your future gift for general support of our programs sustaining active nonviolence, or for a particular project. Contact us for details.
The Essays of A.J. Muste

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