

## EMBRACING THE WORLD

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When Jim Keady came to St. John's University in 1997 to study pastoral theology, serving simultaneously as assistant soccer coach, he did not imagine that he would take center stage in the debate on globalization. It all began after a fellow graduate student, in a letter to a St. John's publication, questioned the morality of an impending university deal with Nike. Sensing Keady's interest in the matter, Father Paul Surlis, who teaches a course on Catholic social teaching, suggested that his student write a paper combining theology and sports. Intrigued, Keady decided to research Nike's labor practices.

In 1997, Nike negotiated a \$3.5 million contract with the St. John's athletic department in which Nike agreed to supply sportswear and equipment to St. John's in return for the athletic department's sponsorship of Nike products. That year, the personal fortune of Nike CEO Phil Knight climbed to \$5.4 billion. Nike was paying Michael Jordan \$20 million a year in promotional fees, an amount that exceeded the annual earnings of all 25,000 workers in the Indonesian shoe industry. Defending Nike's \$200 million advertising deal with the Brazilian national soccer team, Nike President Thomas Clarke said: "You never overpay for things that are good."

In the course of his research, Keady found a predictable pattern in Nike's movement to countries with cheap labor. After democracy movements improved the wages of workers in Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, Nike moved production to Indonesia, and more recently, to China and Vietnam where workers earn as little as twenty cents an hour. Nike defended its low wages by claiming that national governments, not Nike, set minimum wages. Father Surlis found Nike's argument disingenuous. "It does not take an act of parliament for a corporation to pay a just wage," he said. "It's an executive decision that can be conveyed to the floor and put into practice in a matter of days."

Keady found that the minimum wage in countries such as Indonesia did not meet the minimum physical needs of an adult. A 1988-89 study, for instance, found that 88

percent of minimum wage workers in manufacturing facilities around Jakarta were malnourished. Keady concluded that Nike could easily afford to pay its subcontractors significantly more for labor costs but simply chose not to. He believed that Catholic universities had a heightened obligation to insist on ethical standards from the companies with which they did business. Certain that “action on behalf of justice is a constitutive element of what it means to be a Catholic,” as states the pastoral of a 1971 synod of American bishops, Keady attempted to meet with university trustees to discuss the Nike issue, but was rebuffed.

Since members of the St. John’s University soccer team were required to wear Nike sportswear, Keady was soon confronted with a dilemma. According to Keady, the head soccer coach told him in May 1998 to wear Nike sportswear or resign. Keady chose to resign, believing that he had acted according to the fundamental principles of both the Church and St. John’s whose mission statement reads: “We embrace the Judeo-Christian ideals of respect for the rights and dignity of every person and each individual’s responsibility for the world in which we live.”

Responding to the growing criticism of labor practices in the factories of its subcontractors, Nike finally agreed in 1998 to raise the minimum age of workers to 18 and to improve the air quality in the factories. Keady was not mollified, however, since he believes that Nike, with over \$9 billion in revenue and nearly \$800 million in profit in 1997, must pay its workers a living wage.

In May 1999, Keady asked Nike to employ him in one of its Asian supplier factories. After Nike declined his offer, Keady formed the Living Wage Project together with Leslie Kretzu. The two spent a summer in Indonesia living on \$1.25 a day, the wages of a typical Nike factory worker. Eating just one or two meager meals of rice and vegetables a day, Keady and Kretzu, neither of whom were overweight, lost 25 and 15 pounds respectively.

During their ordeal, they met shoe factory workers, typically young women, forced to work 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week, for mere physical subsistence. The women told Keady and Kretzu about their wish for an education and a better life and about the sexual abuse from factory supervisors. Union organizers, who are often raped or murdered for their efforts, described the pervasive fear in factories. Upon their return

to the United States, Keady and Kretzu began a series of annual speaking tours that has brought the reality of sweatshop labor to over 20,000 people at 120 high schools, colleges and universities. The Living Wage Project will soon release a full-length documentary on the lives of Nike workers in Indonesia.

As the free flow of capital wreaks havoc around the globe, resistance to the abuses of globalization is emerging among those who, as Keady puts it, “call others to a standard that dignifies humanity in its fullest sense.” In a recent pastoral letter, the Latin American Jesuit council, citing the impoverishment of millions, called neoliberalism a sin and a violation of the religious principles of social justice. A growing student movement against sweatshop labor has led to sit-ins, knit-ins and rallies at campuses across the United States, bringing home the truth of Andre Gorz’s prophecy that “it is in education that industrial capitalism will provoke revolts which it attempts to avoid in its factories.”

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